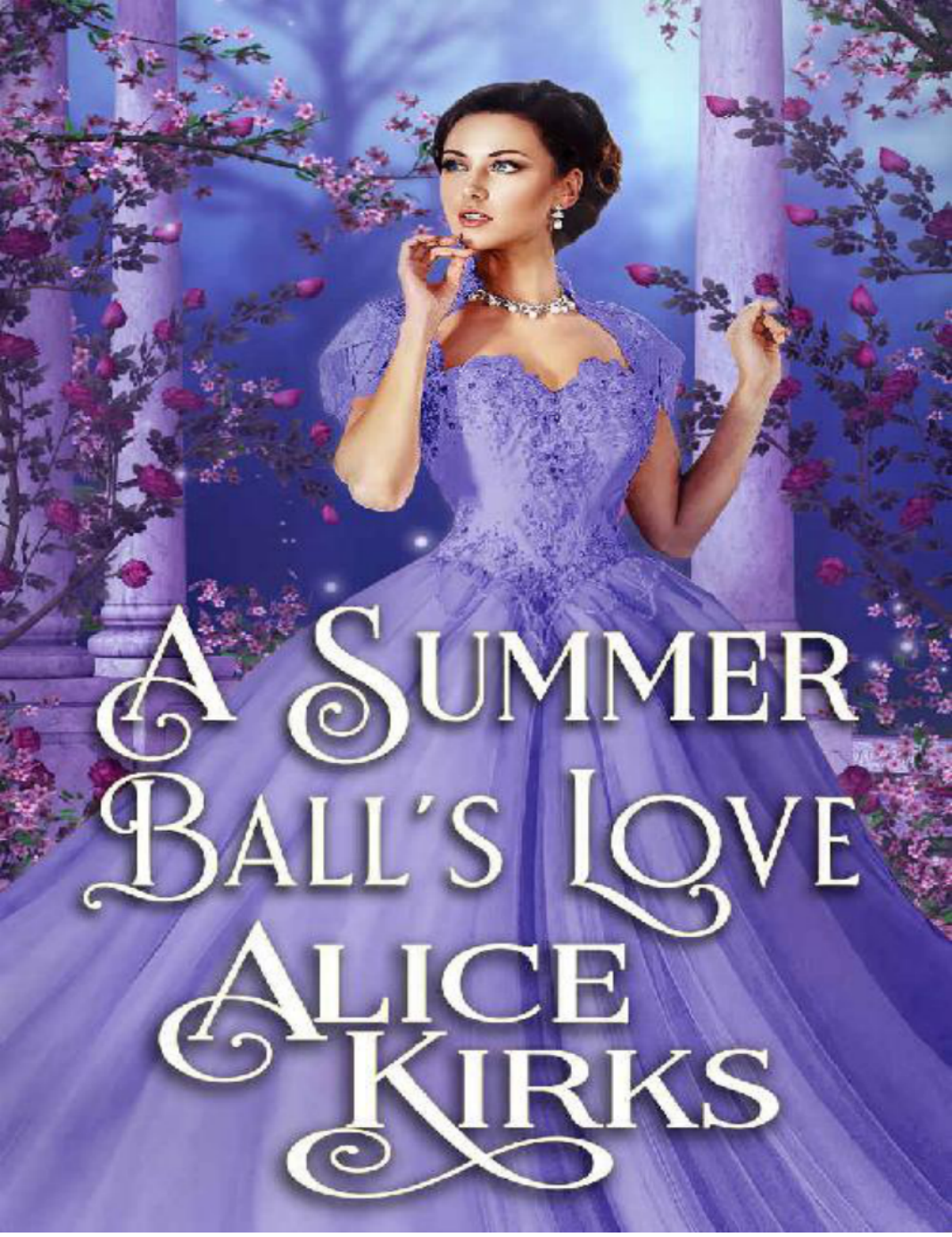

A Summer Ball's Love
Alice Kirks

A Summer Ball's Love

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ALICE KIRKS

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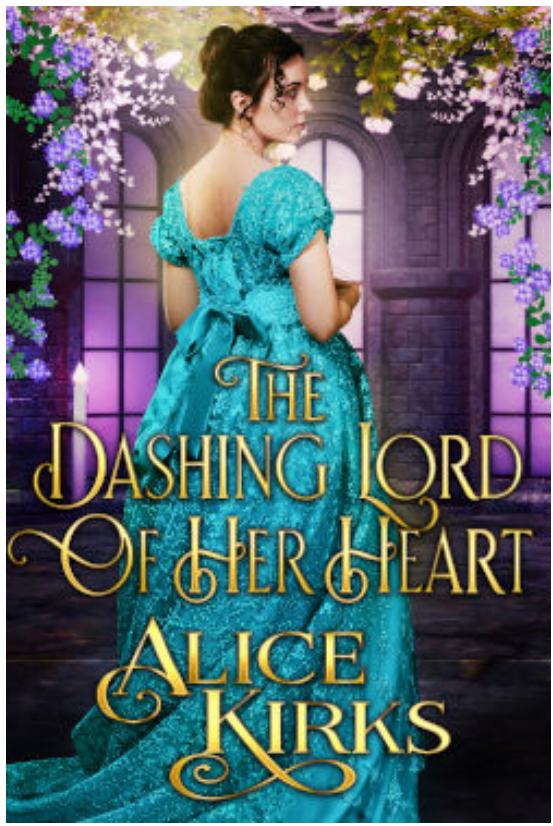
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A Summer Ball's Love

Introduction

Since her beloved father's death, a mysterious illness has plagued the beautiful Mariah Nightingale, taking away her joie de vivre. Unable to stand her loneliness anymore, she hesitantly attends a ball where she meets the most charming Earl she could ever dream of. However, her stepmother is not happy with Mariah's unexpected acquaintance, as she has always envied and viewed her as her own daughter's competitor. To make matters worse, Mariah's illness gets in the way of spending time with her charming admirer and threatens to bring her blossoming dreams crashing down. Will Mariah let down her defences and find the way to be with the man that has started to fill her with joy and love? Or will her bossy stepmother and sudden illness destroy it all?

John Blackmore, Earl of Winchester, did not intend to spend his whole summer in Cheltenham. However, after losing a bet at a card game, he is compelled to keep his word. Little did he know that his dull summer would soon turn into a fascinating one, due to him being immediately mesmerised by the gracious lady he meets on a special night. When John sees that this ethereal existence has been haunted by a mysterious illness, he is determined to move heaven and earth to help her recover. However, time is running short, as the beautiful woman's health mysteriously deteriorates with each passing day. Will John manage to find the cause of Mariah's illness and the cure for both her

disease and his own heart? Or will he fail to rescue the only woman who has managed to occupy his every thought?

While Mariah and John discover the depth of their shared feelings, wicked powers threaten the blooming love between them. When John discovers hidden truths that might irreversibly change Mariah's life forever, her overbearing stepmother will make any effort to keep her confined to the house. Will Mariah and John break down the walls that jeopardize their only chance at a happy life? Could fate have something better in store for them both?

Prologue

Why did people insist on playing cards when they were obviously terrible at them? John had won the last four hands, and yet Hugh just kept playing and raising the stakes. One should always know when to stop, but the man didn't appear to understand that.

"I feel good about this one," said Hugh, grinning at his cards.

"Are you confident about that?"

It was no skin off John's nose if the man lost his money since Hugh didn't seem to care one bit, but John needed more competition, or a game of cards was simply dull.

"As confident about the fact that you're spending the summer with my family and me in Cheltenham," Hugh replied. "Simply say yes, and I can send word of your arrival."

John pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. Hugh's constant badgering about Cheltenham was as annoying as a bit of a scratch at the back of one's throat, the itchy type that refused to be appeased by clearing one's throat.

"I already told you that I have plans in London. That is where all the action is during the summer. Why would I miss the parade of beautiful single women to spend time with you and your family in Cheltenham?"

“You’ve done that for several years already,” Hugh protested. “Why not do something different for once? There are beautiful young women in Cheltenham as well.”

John let out a frustrated sigh. They were going around in circles yet again. What else could he say to get the idea out of Hugh’s head? A thought occurred to John. Hugh was destined to lose this round once again. Why not take advantage of that?

“Beat me in this round, and I might think about it,” John declared.

Hugh’s eyebrows lifted. “Indeed? If I win this round, you’ll agree to come?”

There was no way Hugh would win. “You have my word,” said John, nodding once.

A gleam entered the man’s eyes. “Then, by all means, play your cards.”

John revealed his cards with a little smirk and sat back in his chair, draping his arm along the back.

“Your turn.”

Surely Hugh would accept defeat, and they could be done with the

game? John enjoyed cards as much as anyone else, but he usually didn't have someone pestering him with talk of going to Cheltenham for the summer.

He watched with a little remorse as Hugh's face dramatically fell. The man threw his cards on the table in surrender, bowing his head. There was something rather theatrical about Hugh's reaction, but the man was a tad over-the-top at times.

"Yet another win for the Earl of Winchester," Hugh complained somewhat happily. "I don't know how you do it, John. I thought I had you there."

John lifted an eyebrow. Why on earth would Hugh be happy? Any other man would be angry about losing money yet again, but Hugh merely smiled. Perhaps Hugh had not yet come to understand how expensive it was courting the upper echelons of society and would need to hold his money close to his chest. Hugh and his family were new money, and they certainly acted like it.

"I've never met someone quite so happy about losing a game," John remarked.

"Losing to a friend is more enjoyable than losing to a stranger."

Were they friends? John supposed so. As annoying as Hugh was, the man meant well.

Ignoring the comment, John pulled the pot to him. "It was a pleasure winning against you yet again. I presume this is it for the night? I do

have to get back."

"The night is still young!" Hugh exclaimed. "You're not one to turn in so early. Are you getting old?"

"That's hardly the case," John said dryly. "We're the same age, for goodness' sake."

"Precisely my point! The fun and games only truly begin at nine. We have an hour and a half yet before we get there."

Observing the eager man with mild distaste, John wondered how he came to be friends with such a person. Hugh was not his usual choice of companionship, and yet here the man was.

If not for being at Cambridge together, we would have never crossed paths. New money is not an earl's first choice. Perhaps I was just too nice, and he latched on.

Now, the man wouldn't leave him alone no matter what John said or did. Hugh was a rich leech who sucked the life out of the people he pestered. More specifically, Hugh drained John's energy faster than a long game of rugby. Still, Hugh was good company when he was simply himself and wasn't trying to prove anything. John had to give him that.

"Half an hour more. No more than that, you hear?" John acquiesced.

“That’s the spirit! Why don’t we have a drink? Father got in some whiskey the other day. Black market, of course. He paid a nifty sum for the stuff.”

Money again. All Hugh ever spoke about was money, how much he had or how he spent it. The first rule of fitting in with high society was never mentioning money. It was a lower-class bad habit.

“A whiskey is fine,” said John.

Hugh stood up, his long legs stretching to their full gangly length. John was tall himself, but Hugh stood shoulders above most people. Sometimes, the man had to stoop to enter rooms, but other than that, his height didn’t appear to bother him.

Hugh returned with their drinks, handing one to John. Leaning against the wall, the man took one healthy gulp of whiskey, swallowing with a satisfied sigh. He never flinched or coughed once.

The spirit was enough to put chest hairs on anyone, but Hugh looked like he could finish a bottle and still remain standing. It had to be his height. He just had more to him than most people and could better distribute the liquor. At least, that’s what John thought.

“Are you ready for another game?” Hugh asked.

John groaned. “I thought we settled this already. The last game was the last one. I won fair and square.”

“I know, I know, but we won’t play for money this time. I have something else in mind.”

“Don’t tell me it’s a piece of property or something. I have all the land I could ever need or want.”

Hugh shook his head. “Not at all. I wager your agreement to spend the summer with my family and me in Cheltenham. If you win, I’ll never mention it again. If you lose, you have to come–no excuses.”

Again, with Cheltenham! When would Hugh put the idea to rest? John took a much-needed swig of whiskey, hissing when the liquid gave a pleasant burn as it coursed down his throat.

“Well?” asked Hugh a bit impatiently.

“My silence should speak volumes. What more can I possibly say to convince you that I do not wish to go to Cheltenham? You are the one who refuses to listen.”

“But that is why I’ve come up with this wager,” Hugh explained. “You’ll never hear me mention it again for as long as I live. As long as you win, of course,” the man added.

It was a foolish wager considering that John had won every single hand. Still, if it meant that John would never have to be asked again about visiting the town, then one last game sounded like a solution.

“Go ahead and deal,” John finally said.

Hugh could hardly contain himself as he took his seat and dealt the cards. It didn’t take long before John realised his cards were primarily a useless mess, and Hugh looked more jubilant than ever. That probably didn’t mean anything because the man smiled even when he lost.

“I know I’ve said this before, but I feel good about this round,” said Hugh.

John couldn’t say the same. “Just stop talking and play.”

Eventually, John got a better hand. This was more like it. The thought of spending an entire summer with Hugh’s obnoxious family left him slightly stressed. The Hatchers were not bad people, but they had yet to learn a thing or two about etiquette. One could buy their way into society, but that didn’t make one part of it. A person could be acknowledged but remain on the outskirts.

“This is it,” Hugh said. “You go first.”

John wasn’t entirely confident, but it was a good hand, nevertheless. He spread his cards out on the table, fully expecting to see Hugh’s disappointment, but that was not what happened. The man grinned until much of his teeth showed and laid his cards on the table one by one.

“Read them and weep,” Hugh declared triumphantly. “You’re coming

to Cheltenham, dear fellow. Mother and Father will be so pleased."

What? How was this possible? John left his seat, taking a closer look at Hugh's cards. Sure enough, the man had played a better hand. Narrowing his eyes, John looked at his friend, noticing how smug Hugh looked.

"You played badly on purpose," he accused.

"What gives you that idea?" Hugh asked.

"Don't give me that! You planned this entire thing, didn't you? You made me believe that you're a terrible player, so you could trap me into going to Cheltenham with you."

Hugh pulled his head back, planting his hand on his chest. "Me? Why would I do such a thing?"

"Because you're a sneaky fellow who cannot take no for an answer."

"But fair is fair," the man insisted. "I won, and you lost."

"By trickery!" John complained.

"That's what you claim, but there's no proof of that. I simply got lucky. Don't be a sore loser, John. I promise you'll have a marvellous

time with my family and me.”

John doubted that, but he didn’t have much of a choice, did he?

Chapter 1

Mariah felt the air swirl around her legs as she spun on her toes, laughing when the room became a blur. She paused, her arms outstretched to keep her balance. Everyone was looking at her with such admiration and adoration, not at all minding her shoeless feet.

“How graceful you are, dear,” cried a matronly woman.

Mariah curtsied. “Why, thank you, Mrs Humplebottom.”

Humplebottom? What an odd name, but it suited the woman well. Mariah leapt forward, clearing several feet before landing with delicate poise in front of the orchestra.

“Would you play a jolly tune?” she asked them. “‘Tis a wonderful midsummer’s eve, and I do so love to dance.”

The entire orchestra bowed to her and immediately struck up a melody that would please even the fussiest of princesses. Mariah spun away, her feet barely touching the wooden floor as her feet lifted and fell in a rhythmic flow. Every movement was effortless and perfect, earning applause from her audience.

“Never stop dancing!” they called out to her.

Mariah skipped to them, holding out her hand. “Will no one join me?”

“Oh no, dear,” Mr Rumple protested, his moustache twitching. “No one can dance quite like you.”

Mariah planted her hands on her hips. “Are you certain you will not join me?”

The guests protested, urging her to continue dancing. Try as she might, Mariah could not convince a soul to join her on the vast dance floor. She gave a minute shrug of her shoulders and floated away until she stood in the centre of the room.

“Dance for us, Mariah!” a young woman shouted.

“Yes!” a man agreed. “We wish to see more.”

How insistent they all were. Mariah rose to her toes and prepared to spin once more but found that her feet would not cooperate. Frowning, she looked down and saw her feet were fused as though she were a fish. Alarmed, she tried to pull them apart but lost her balance and crashed to the floor. To Mariah’s horror, laughter erupted throughout the room.

“What are you doing, Mariah?” asked Lady Tottenham.

Mariah held her hand out, tears in her eyes. “Please help me, Mother.”

“Silly, silly girl,” the Baroness scolded. “I am not your mother. Did you forget?”

“Oh, Mama!” cried Louisa. “Look how foolish she looks. She’ll embarrass us. Make her stop!”

Mariah flinched at her stepsister’s words. Moving onto her hands and knees, Mariah tried to get up again but fell heavily on her palms. She cried out in pain, falling to her side and curling into a foetal position. The room continued to roar with laughter, throwing terrible comments at Mariah. It wasn’t her fault that she was so weak!

“It’s not my fault!” Mariah cried with a start, sitting up in bed.

She glanced around her room, clutching the sides of her head in despair. She had had one of her nightmares again. It had been so vivid this time that Mariah could feel the hardwood floor she had fallen on. She cursed silently, pushing the covers away as she got off her bed. Why couldn’t the dream remain beautiful and sweet? Why did it always turn into a moment of shame and pain?

Mariah crossed the room to a pitcher of water, pouring some into her basin. She washed her face, liberally splashing the water until it dripped down the front of her nightdress. The water felt cool and refreshing against her slightly feverish skin. She lightly cupped the back of her neck, hissing against the sudden cold. Why was one’s back always more sensitive than the front?

Drying her face, Mariah sat at the window, glad to see the sun had not risen yet. She enjoyed feeling the first rays of warmth from the ball of fire and found its morning hues aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Of

course, sunsets were just as beautiful, but sunrises brought life and colour to an otherwise dark world.

A tiny bird perched on the flower box outside Mariah's window, tilting its head as it assessed her.

"You're fortunate, little bird. You're able to fly high above the trees or swoop down to rest on whatever surface you wish. I can hardly place one foot in front of the other at times."

The bird didn't seem to think much of Mariah's words because it flew off and disappeared from view. Not even a simple bird wanted her company. Sighing, she moved away from the window.

"I suppose I should get ready. Lady Tottenham will not be pleased with my tardiness."

Breakfast was always at six-thirty sharp, although if Louisa chose to sleep in, she could. Mariah didn't have that luxury of time but didn't mind too much. She enjoyed mornings and liked that she could get a head start on her day.

Choosing a simple dark grey day dress, Mariah removed her nightdress and dressed. She didn't feel tired or weak today and could probably get a lot more done than usual. It was a bother to have bouts of fatigue that attacked one quite suddenly and left one incapacitated for some time. When would she regain her health again?

"It has been so long since I took a walk through the woods. Lady Tottenham forbids that I step any further than the front door!"

Mariah's stepmother was concerned something terrible might happen to Mariah if she went out of sight and insisted that she stay in the house.

As she got ready for the day, Mariah thought about the first part of her dream, recalling how strong and healthy she had felt while twirling about the dance floor. Everyone had been kind and supportive, smiling encouragingly and applauding her grace and beauty. It was the second part that always forced Mariah to wake up in a pool of perspiration.

Tucking her hair into a simple style, Mariah used a pin to hold it in place and left her room, hurrying downstairs. She had a few minutes before the meal officially began and needed to be seated before then, or Lady Tottenham would gaze down at her in disapproval.

The Baroness spent much of her time annoyed by Mariah and called it concern. Sometimes, Mariah wondered how true that was, but why wouldn't it be? Lady Tottenham had sworn to Mariah's father on his death bed that she would look after Mariah and ensure she was settled into a good family.

"Not that there is any chance of marriage in my condition," Mariah whispered sadly.

What man would want a weak wife? Louisa had often said that Mariah would likely never marry because men were impatient when it came to illness. Mariah wasn't confident as to how true that was, but Louisa did know a great many things. The two young women were the same age, but one would think that Louisa was several years older.

Mariah found the room already occupied and wondered if she was late. Even Louisa had made it down on time.

“Good morning, my lady. Good morning, Louisa. I hope you both slept well?”

“As well as can be,” retorted Lady Tottenham. “We were waiting for you to come down so we can begin our meal as a family. What kept you?”

“But I have six minutes to spare,” said Mariah.

“Is that how you answer me after all I’ve done for you?” the Baroness asked quietly.

“Not at all, my lady,” Mariah denied. “Please forgive me.”

Lady Tottenham nodded. “You’re fortunate that I’m so kind. Many people would not take well to such snide comments. Remember that your father left everything to me because he couldn’t trust you with even a cent of his money.”

The comment hurt. Mariah didn’t understand what she had said to anger the woman, but she let it be. Charlotte Nightingale was a woman of quick temper, but she had taken care of Mariah’s father when he fell ill and continued to look after Mariah although she was of age. A lesser woman would not have done as much. After all, Mariah was not the woman’s daughter. Sometimes, Mariah wished her

mother was still alive, but where did wishing get one?

“Thank you, my lady.”

“You’re such a wonderful person, Mama,” Louisa cooed. “It’s no wonder that everyone loves you.”

Lady Tottenham smiled. “A woman must do what she must. People admire that.”

Mother and daughter continued to speak as Mariah put a slice of toast on her plate and buttered it. She was still considering a pork sausage when the Baroness addressed her.

“Mariah, how do you feel today?”

The words were cautiously spoken, leaving Mariah to guess why. Did Lady Tottenham expect her to faint at the breakfast table?

“Well, thank you, my lady. I’m much improved from yesterday.”

“Indeed?” asked Louisa, hardly hiding a scowl. “How nice.”

Louisa didn’t sound as though she was pleased, but Mariah put that down to early morning. The woman was not at her best until well past nine.

“Yes. I think so,” said Mariah. “‘Tis wonderful to wake up feeling slightly more energetic and stronger than usual. If I could continue to improve, I might regain my full health soon.”

“Let’s not be hasty, child,” the Baroness protested. “One step at a time. We wouldn’t want you to wear yourself out, now would we?”

“Yes, my lady,” Mariah agreed. “I give you my word that I will not overextend myself.”

The Baroness smiled, but it never reached her eyes. “That’s good to hear, dear.”

Everyone minded their breakfast, but Mariah ate sparingly. Yesterday, Cook had promised her an apple pie if she was well enough to join them in the kitchen a little later. Mariah needed to reserve her appetite for the sweet tart covered in lovely custard.

“You do not intend to go to the ball, do you?” Louisa asked suddenly. “You’re always so terribly dull at them.”

“I do plan to attend,” Mariah affirmed. “It has been some time since I’ve left the house.”

Lucy, her best friend, had painted such a grand picture of the ball during her visit the other day that Mariah couldn’t imagine not going. Perhaps providence would have mercy on her and allow Mariah to be

the lively and energetic young woman she used to be.

How lovely it would be to dance again! To weave in and out of the crowd, laugh with the guests, and perhaps have a little harmless flirting with a gentleman or two. I never appreciated my health until I lost it quite suddenly.

"Mama, tell Mariah that she cannot go," Louisa whined. "She might faint or do something equally embarrassing at the ball. 'Tis better that she stays behind."

However, before Lady Tottenham could speak, Mariah voiced her opinion, giving Louisa a little annoyed look.

"I did say that I feel better. I believe the tea is helping me, so 'tis no bother at all to attend. I shall not embarrass you, I assure you. I simply wish to get out of the house and be amongst other people."

"Do you think it wise?" asked the Baroness.

"Mental health is as important as physical health, my lady," said Mariah. "I need some time away from the reminder that I'm unwell. Sometimes, this house feels like confinement rather than my home. I need some time away."

Lady Tottenham stared at her for several moments as though searching for something. Mariah hoped the woman wouldn't insist on her staying behind. She was determined to go.

“Very well, dear,” the older woman finally said. “If you are confident that you will be well enough, then, by all means, attend the ball.”

“But Mama!” Louisa protested.

“Hush, Louisa,” her mother lightly scolded. “If Mariah says she will be well, then we must believe her.” She turned to Mariah. “Have you taken your tea yet?”

Mariah always had her tea first thing in the morning, but the dream had knocked her off-kilter.

“Not yet, but I’ll have Susan bring it to me.”

Mariah gestured to the maid standing in the corner of the room to fetch her special tea from the apothecary. It was a special concoction designed to fortify her and keep her bouts of fatigue and weakness away.

Susan returned minutes later with a tea tray and a letter. “This came for you, Miss.”

“Thank you, Susan,” Mariah replied. “You may go. Please tell Cook I’ll be with her a little later this morning.”

“Yes, Miss,” the woman curtsied and left.

“Who is it from?” asked Louisa, craning her neck to get a better look.

Mariah noticed the handwriting, smiling. “Lucy.”

“Oh? How is her brother?” the young woman pressed. “I heard he is back from university.”

Louisa had a little crush on Martin, Lucy’s brother, although she tried hard to hide it.

“I am confident he is well, or Lucy would have said otherwise. Do you mind if I take my tea in the parlour?” she asked her stepmother.

“Yes, as long as you promise to drink all your tea,” the Baroness advised. “Will you be able to carry the tray?”

“I think so,” said Mariah, standing up. She lifted the tray, weighing it in her hands. “It feels light enough, my lady. Please excuse me.”

Mariah hurried as fast as her legs could carry her, eager to know what Lucy had written to her. Lucy was her link to the outside world and often visited Mariah.

Dearest Mariah,

I need my best friend to join me this morning for a time of chatter, and to a lesser extent, readying for the ball. Do say you'll come?

Yours,

Lucy Dunn

That sounded like a wonderful idea–the pie would have to wait until tomorrow. Mariah folded the letter and stretched for her tea, already thinking ahead. She held the cup to her lips but stopped shy of drinking it when Lady Tottenham entered the room.

"What did Lucy have to say?" the woman asked, taking a seat.

Had the woman left her breakfast just to come and inquire about Lucy's note? That was rather nosey of her but expected. The Baroness was protective of Mariah.

"She wishes for me to join her getting ready for the ball. I should probably leave now."

"I know that you want to go, dear, but I must remind you of your health," the Baroness said. "Do you think it wise to go?"

But hadn't the woman just said that Mariah could go if she felt well enough?

“Do not be concerned, my lady. I wouldn’t go if I was unwell.”

“Yes, but–”

“Lucy will take care of me,” Mariah quickly interrupted. “She knows all about my illness and will watch over me. You needn’t worry.”

The Baroness looked as though she wished to argue further, but she sighed instead.

“Very well. Have you at least had your tea?”

“Yes,” Mariah lied. “Please excuse me.”

Mariah felt guilty about lying to her stepmother, but if she didn’t go now, the woman might find a way to make her stay.

Mariah found Louisa at the door, the young woman’s pretty face pulled into an unattractive scowl.

“Do not embarrass me,” Louisa warned.

“I wouldn’t think of it.”

Mariah passed her, heading upstairs with a little more skip to her step. She truly was feeling well today and had a good feeling about the ball. Perhaps she'll dance and laugh as she used to.

"Now, that is wishful thinking," she whispered to herself.

Chapter 2

Cheltenham was not where he wanted to be, but John had to admit that the town was beautiful. Now, if only Hugh could stop talking long enough for John to actually enjoy the serenity the small town provided. The man spoke at every chance he got, chattering away about all sorts of things, most of which John was not interested in.

"We probably have the best horse races in all of England," Hugh boasted. "I've organised for us to see one next week."

"Some people might argue with you there," John countered. "Ascot is popular and even boasted Tsar Alexander as a guest. Others prefer Newcastle, Winchester, and Yorkshire. What makes Cheltenham better?"

"It just is," said an annoyed Hugh. "Everyone knows it."

Had John struck a nerve? Probably. Hugh had been selling Cheltenham to John for so long, touting it as a great place because it was the home of many affluent people. A town wasn't interesting or better than another just because rich people stayed in it. There had to be more to it.

"Which one?" asked Martin.

The third to their group, Martin Dunn, was more of a local than Hugh was, but Hugh acted as though he knew everything there was to know about the town. Martin humoured him as much as John did.

“Which one what?” asked Hugh.

“Which race are we going to?”

“Oh. Cleeve Hill,” Hugh answered. “Father has been breeding and training a couple of our Thoroughbreds for the race,” Hugh replied. “He has complained about the cost, but it’s worth it when your horse wins. I think he has spent close to twenty thousand pounds in the last year alone.”

Hugh just had to throw in a comment about money. His parents were the same, often informing John about how much each valuable piece of furniture or artefact cost in their home.

“Do you bet on your own horses?” John questioned.

“Horse owners agree on wagers,” said Hugh. “And the winner takes all. Father hopes to win this year, but I do make side bets on other horses. I like to keep my options open when it comes to money.”

John paid Hugh a wry glance, shaking his head slightly. Enough was never enough with the Hatchers, but they were generous hosts. John had been waited on hand and foot since arriving at Cotts Manor and hadn’t dipped into his own pocket for a single thing yet.

Martin kicked a stone, wincing when it narrowly missed a couple. “My apologies!” he shouted. “Oh no,” he muttered under his breath. “It’s

Mr and Mrs Soot.”

“Who are they?” John asked.

“The annoying parents of an equally annoying girl,” the man answered. “Oh no! They’re coming this way,” Martin hissed. “Hide me, please.”

The couple had seen him and were making a beeline for him. John felt sorry for Martin because he could fully relate to how the man was feeling. He also had parents hounding him to marry their daughters.

“Martin!” the woman exclaimed. “How wonderful to see you. Isn’t it, Jeffrey?”

“Yes, yes,” Jeffrey agreed. “It certainly is, my dear Martha. We were not aware that you had returned, young man.”

“I haven’t been back that long, sir,” Martin replied.

John knew that was a lie. Martin had been back for nearly two weeks, which was plenty of time to make his return known about town. The man had obviously been keeping a low profile for this very reason.

“Rebecca was asking about you just the other day,” Martha said. “She wondered if you were coming back at all. She hopes to dance with you at the next ball. She’ll be happy to know you’re here. I’ll tell her to save a spot or two on her dance card.”

Martin smiled weakly, looking to John and Hugh for help. No gentleman would turn down the chance to dance with a pretty young woman, so John had to surmise that the woman was unfortunate looking. Poor fellow.

“My parents are hosting the very first ball,” Hugh put in. “I expect you received an invitation?”

Jeffrey looked at Hugh with interest. “Oh? You’re the Hatcher boy, aren’t you? I don’t think I’ve seen you around these parts.”

John cast Hugh a puzzled look. Hugh had made it seem as though everyone knew him, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I’ve been away at Cambridge,” Hugh explained. “This is merely our summer home.”

“I see,” the older man said. “I hear the Earl of Winchester will be attending as well. Most people are aware of that name, I expect, although I haven’t met him myself.”

John narrowed his eyes at Hugh, shaking his head slightly. The last thing John wanted was for the couple to latch onto him and try to throw their daughter at him.

“Yes, you’re correct,” Hugh agreed. “Lord Winchester will be the guest of honour at the ball.”

Guest of honour? John hadn't heard anything about that. What else had Hugh been saying without John's knowledge?

"My dear, why don't we return home?" Martha suggested. "I expect Rebecca needs me to help her get ready for the ball. Not that she needs much doing," the woman added. "My daughter is easily the most beautiful woman in Cheltenham."

John doubted that but smiled politely. The couple soon hurried away, and Martin could breathe easily.

"Thank you for that, Hugh," the man said. "Mr and Mrs Soot are a handful, but you managed to take their focus off me. Now, they'll be concerned about impressing the Earl of Winchester."

John rolled his eyes. "Spare me. Let's just keep walking and try to avoid any more run-ins with locals who have eligible daughters."

Martin and Hugh fell into conversation about horses once more, but John was more interested in looking around the town to catch if people were staring at him. He had come to Cheltenham thinking that hardly anyone would know him, but now John wasn't so sure.

Hugh must have noticed that not all the attention was on him because he turned to John, smiling when he realised what John was doing.

"That's rather self-centred of you," Hugh remarked.

John scowled. “Observing others is not self-centred.”

“You’re observing others in relation to yourself,” the man countered. “I’d say that is self-centred.”

“What is wrong with that?” Martin asked, confused. “I do that myself.”

“But you’re not an earl,” Hugh explained. “Our dear friend here seems to believe that everyone knows him and only care about his title. He’s paranoid like that.”

John clenched his jaw. He didn’t appreciate the foolish teasing and being called paranoid. People did fight and clamour to be near him because they wanted to elevate their status in society. Rarely did anyone wish to be with John without an agenda.

“Considering that most people tend to use my title to promote themselves, I think I’m allowed to be cautious,” John retorted. “You yourself used my name for the ball this evening.”

Hugh laughed, slapping him on the shoulder. “Oh, don’t take it too seriously, old chap. Besides, using your name is an excellent way to meet the town’s people, don’t you think? More people will come because they wish to see you.”

“How nice,” said John drily.

They walked on further, attracting many appreciative stares from women. It was probably something of a spectacle to see three young and handsome men walking about town because some people actually stopped to watch them.

“We’re causing quite a stir,” Hugh said happily. “Imagine all the young women who will wish to dance with us. Our names will be on every dance card!”

“I don’t think you would want to dance with every woman,” said Martin. “Some women are better left to men with a little more courage if you know what I mean.”

“Uncomely women?” Hugh asked.

Martin nodded. “That, and those who have been on the shelf for too long. Some women are desperate to marry and will do everything to trap you. I was nearly caught myself. Thank goodness I had the good sense to hide.”

The man shivered as though recalling a memory, his face a mask of dimmed horror.

“Now, I have to know what happened,” John insisted.

“I don’t wish to speak of it and will never speak of it,” Martin vowed. “And don’t bother trying to get the story out of me through drinking–I

can hold my liquor."

John was disappointed but understood. Whatever had happened to Martin must have been a harrowing experience.

"Why don't we go to the Pump House?" Hugh suggested.

"Now?" asked Martin. "It's mere hours before your ball. You cannot be late to your own event."

"I suppose you're right, but I'm growing tired of walking about with no end in sight. I think I've had enough exposure for one day. We'll save the rest for later."

That surprised John. Hugh was all about being known and seen by everyone. The man needed people to know that his family weren't just simple middle-class citizens but wealthy people who deserved to be part of the upper crust of society. John had never had to prove himself before, and therefore couldn't understand the obsession.

"We're actually near my house," said Martin.

John looked around, seeing several houses. "Which one?"

"The one with the chaise drawing up to the front. I expect that's my sister."

Hugh's eyes lit up. "I didn't know you had a sister."

"Do not even think about it," Martin warned. "I do not want anyone looking at my sister with anything more than a brotherly glance."

"You're no fun at all," Hugh complained. "Is she pretty? Never mind, I'll see for myself."

Two women jumped down, but the men were on the wrong side of the chaise to see them clearly. They only caught a glimpse of the women with John seeing a fleeting pair of perfectly grey eyes that struck him to the core. They were magnificent and could probably look into a man's soul.

"Who is she?" John breathed.

"Which one?" Martin asked suspiciously.

Did Martin even have to ask? The man had to be blind not to have noticed the woman.

"The grey-eyed woman," John replied impatiently.

"Oh," said Martin, his cheeks reddening. "That would be Mariah Nightingale, the late Baron of Tottenham's daughter and my sister's best friend. They've known each other for years."

Did the man's blush signify that he was embarrassed or interested in the woman? John hoped it was the former.

"I'm rather disappointed that I didn't get to see more of them," Hugh complained. "They are coming to the ball, aren't they?"

Martin nodded. "Lucy is, but I'm not entirely sure about Mariah."

That surprised John. What young woman wouldn't wish to attend a ball? It didn't make sense.

"Why? Does she not like balls?" he asked.

"Not precisely," Martin explained carefully. "Poor Mariah suffered a tragedy which changed her. She used to be the life of any party. If an event was held, then it was a given that Mariah would be there."

That sounded ominous. What could have happened to the woman to have changed her so much? John almost didn't want to know, but he felt himself asking the question anyway. Martin looked rather sad as he answered. Whether he was sad for himself or Mariah was not clear.

"Her father passed away. If anyone knew Mariah, they would know that her father was the centre of her life. Lady Tottenham was likely jealous of the relationship between her husband and stepdaughter. The Baroness is quite a piece of work."

“Surely Miss Nightingale recovered from her father’s death?” John asked hopefully.

Martin shook his head. “Sadly, no. The loss has made her dull and lifeless. Mariah is merely a shadow of her former self. She is often struck down by a mysterious illness that leaves her without energy. She rarely leaves her house now. Lucy visits her when she can and always comes back crying.”

It seemed cruel and unfair that such a young woman should be so affected by a death. John failed to understand it.

“Isn’t there anything that can be done for her?”

“Lucy has mentioned a tea that is meant to help, but my sister reckons it does nothing at all because Mariah is no better than when she first grew ill.”

“I don’t want to stand here listening about tragedies or sad people anymore,” Hugh complained. “Let’s go back to my house and have a drink.”

John was irritated by Hugh’s interruption, but the man was right. They couldn’t stand in one place forever. They turned, but John couldn’t resist the urge to look back at Martin’s house, hoping he could catch another glance of Mariah. Perhaps the woman would come to the ball and approach him. One could hope.

Chapter 3

Mariah always felt at peace in Lucy's company. Hugging a pillow to her chest, she smiled at the woman animatedly telling a story. The bed bounced with each movement, giving Mariah the feeling of riding in a wheelbarrow.

"So, I naturally peeked through the peephole to see what Martin was on about and saw Lady Farrow pocketing an ornate teaspoon!"

Mariah gasped. "She didn't!"

Lucy put a hand on her chest, getting to her knees. "I solemnly swear on all that is holy and good that I witnessed Lady Farrow steal that spoon."

The holier-than-thou Viscountess was the loudest person in church and often preached to all who would listen (and not!) about the evils of sin. Fancy her being the one to commit the sin of theft.

"Well, that certainly paints a person in a different light," said Mariah, still in shock. "Who would have thought it?"

"Those were my precise thoughts. I didn't know what to do, so I laughed."

"You didn't!"

“I certainly did!” the woman affirmed. “I think Lady Farrow heard me because she came running to the door. Having had a brother who tormented me while growing up ensured that I was nimble on my feet. I hid behind the second-floor drapes. It’s a good thing she’s rather blind, or she would have seen my feet sticking out the bottom.”

The entire situation must have been terrifying but amusing and fun. Mariah wished she could have been there to witness the whole thing or perhaps have been part of it. Instead, she was stuck at home, where she was reminded every day about her illness.

“Did you speak to your parents about the theft?”

“My parents are just as afraid of Lady Farrow,” Lucy declared. “I simply took the spoon back when the old crone wasn’t looking.”

“How on earth did you manage that?”

“I bumped into her and slid my finger into her pocket. Fortunately for me, the top of the spoon was sticking out, so it was fairly easy. I got away with a little scolding and the smell of fish and lavender.”

Mariah pulled her face. “That couldn’t have been a pleasant smell.”

“If you like the smell of fish slowly rotting in the sun, and the scent of strong lavender mingling with the putrid smell, then you’ll like it.”

Mariah gagged, coughing. “No, please. Don’t tell me anymore.”

Lucy laughed, falling back onto the bed. “The smell was worse than it sounds. I had to hold coffee beans to my nose for half an hour before the lovely fragrance left me.”

“I would have emptied my stomach contents there and then. Thank goodness I wasn’t there.”

“You’ve always had a delicate sense of smell,” Lucy remarked. “Do you recall how you managed to find my comb just by sniffing for it? You’re better than a bloodhound.”

“Thank you… I think. It wasn’t hard finding the comb because you douse all your hair accessories in jasmine. I simply had to follow the scent of jasmine.”

Mariah’s sense of smell wasn’t as good as it used to be. Constantly being ill had weakened all her senses and damaged her self-worth. It was challenging trying to see the bright side of her situation when it had taken so much away from Mariah. Worst of all, no physician had been able to identify the cause of her wasting disease. Lady Tottenham had consulted many of them, but none of them had been able to help.

“Why have you grown sad all of a sudden?” Lucy asked.

Mariah smiled, shaking her head. This wasn’t the time to feel sorry for herself. She was having a good time with her friend, and that’s all that

mattered.

“Nothing. What time does the ball start?”

“At six, but we’ll arrive at seven. Who wishes to be the first person there? I certainly don’t.”

Mariah’s brow puckered delicately. “But won’t an hour seem rude?”

“Only wallflowers get to balls on time because they are desperate,” Lucy insisted. “We are certainly not wallflowers. We have to beat suitors off with a stick!”

Mariah laughed sadly. “I used to, but now I’m not well enough to be of much interest to anyone. Most people steer clear of me.”

“I blame that on your evil stepmother and stepsister. They purposefully keep you from having any fun. They would keep me away if they could!”

“Oh, don’t say that,” Mariah protested. “They mean well.”

Lucy gave her a dubious look but said nothing. The woman believed that the Baroness and Louisa were not well-meaning and purposefully kept Mariah from everyone who loved her. Mariah knew that wasn’t true at all. While Louisa could be insensitive at times, she wasn’t nasty, and the Baroness was simply looking after Mariah like any good woman would do.

“Why do you dislike them so?” Mariah asked.

“They haven’t given me a reason to like them since they arrived in Cheltenham. That horrible Louisa is the worst of the two.”

“Lucy!”

“It’s the truth!”

Mariah sighed, burying her face in the pillow. Lucy was so headstrong and insistent about the matter, but Mariah lived with them and therefore knew them better. Putting the pillow down, Mariah stretched for Lucy’s hand.

“Let’s not argue about this anymore,” Mariah said. “I wish today to be a good one.”

Lucy squeezed her hand in turn. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t. We have several hours until the ball. What should we do?”

“We could take a walk,” Lucy suggested. “You’re looking much stronger today and could probably handle a short stroll.”

“I’m certainly in better health,” Mariah agreed. “But I do not know if a walk would be good for me. I tend to tire easily and wouldn’t want to collapse on the way.”

“Do not be so pessimistic,” Lucy urged. “I’ll put you on my back if I must. You do not weigh much.”

Mariah’s face fell, putting her hands around her middle. “I have lost a little weight, but it’s not too much, is it?”

A stricken-looking Lucy moved to Mariah, putting her arms around her. “That’s not what I meant at all. Please forgive me, Mariah. I tend to put my foot where my mouth is.”

“Don’t be sorry, Lucy. I’m a tad sensitive about it, that is all.”

Mariah patted her distraught friend’s back until Lucy pulled away. The woman looked like she had just injured a frail little deer.

“I would never want to hurt you,” Lucy insisted. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Mariah assured her. “You’re the only one I trust in the entire world. You could never hurt me, not even by accident.”

Lucy hugged her once more, holding her tightly before letting Mariah go. Mariah thought she heard the woman sniff, but Lucy's gaze was averted, so she couldn't see anything.

"Just a moment, please," the woman said, leaving the bed.

Mariah frowned as the woman left the room. "I thought I was the sensitive one," she said to herself. "Whatever has come over Lucy?"

Mariah wondered if she should follow her friend, but she stayed put. Lucy would eventually come back and be her usual self and likely pretend the emotional moment hadn't happened. The woman didn't like to show her sensitive side often, preferring to be strong and wilful before others.

Mariah decided to fix the bed, fluffing up the pillows and straightening the covers. When Lucy returned, Mariah was rearranging the woman's vanity table.

"What on earth are you doing?" Lucy asked.

"Nothing makes sense," Mariah complained. "How do you get ready for the day when everything is so messy and disorganised?"

"Organised chaos." Lucy grinned. "You know that. You know I'll just mess it all up by the time we're ready for the ball."

"I know. You've always been a tad bit messy."

“Mother always complains about it,” Lucy remarked. “She believes a woman must always be neat and proper, but I tell her that Martin was greedy and asked God for everything that I should have received at birth. He loses his head at the mere sign of dirt in his room.”

“Louisa is the same, but she is the one who makes the dirt and then yells at the servants for the mess as though they were the culprits.” Mariah clapped a hand over her mouth. “I don’t think I should have said that,” she mumbled. “I sounded mean.”

Lucy groaned. “You’re too good for those evil witches. Why did you have to end up with them? Fate can be so cruel.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. I’m perfectly fine with them and will continue to do so for as long as I am with them.”

“Do you plan to leave?”

Mariah shrugged. “I do not know. Where would I go? I feel that I’m a terrible burden on my stepmother.”

Lucy snorted. “She cannot be much of a mother when she makes you call her Lady Tottenham.”

Mariah also wondered at that. Mariah used to call the Baroness ‘Mother’ when her father was still alive, but as soon as the Baron died, the woman warned Mariah never to call her that again. The Baroness

would forevermore be addressed as Lady Tottenham, and Mariah had to tell people that it was her own preference. Lucy was the only one who knew the truth.

“She isn’t my mother,” Mariah explained weakly.

“Oh, stop making excuses for her,” Lucy snapped. “Let’s stop talking about them and focus on you. I hoped you would be well when I sent the note, and thankfully, you were. But I cannot understand your illness one bit. Your health often comes and goes without warning. One minute you’re perfectly fine, and the next, you can hardly stand! Do you know what causes your bad days? It would help if you did.”

Mariah felt foolish for not knowing her saucer from her teacup when it came to her illness. She had tried to keep track of it by keeping a journal, but that didn’t work because Mariah could find no pattern to the illness. It was as mysterious as the murky waters of the River Thames.

“I’m afraid I have no answer for that. Sometimes I grow weak in the mornings, other times in the afternoons or evenings. It changes from day to day and gives no indication of appearing or disappearing.”

Lucy sighed, returning to her bed and planting her chin in her palm. “Well, that’s unfortunate. But do not fret; we shall come up with a cure even if it’s the last thing I do. You will not be forced to succumb to this illness for the rest of your life.”

“The tea works well,” Mariah added.

“Does it?”

“At least I think it does. Why else would I feel better some days?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Let’s look on the bright side,” Mariah urged. “I feel well today, and I’m happy that I’ll be able to have some fun at the Earl’s ball. I overheard Louisa say it would be the best event of the Season, and I’m inclined to think so as well. Do you know the Earl?”

It was Mariah’s first time hearing about the Earl of Winchester and had never seen him before. It seemed odd for the man to appear out of nowhere and throw a ball in Cheltenham, but each to their own.

“Not personally, but I did catch a glimpse of him walking with Hugh Hatcher and Martin. Didn’t you see him?”

“Where was he?”

“Walking by the house when we arrived,” said Lucy. “The tallest man was Hugh, but the other was the Earl.”

Mariah had vaguely recalled a man with green eyes and reddish-brown hair looking at her. The moment had been brief and unnerving, but she had soon forgotten about it when she and Lucy entered the house.

“I think I saw a little of him.”

“He was rather handsome, don’t you think?” said Lucy. “The women in this town will be lining up to dance with him. He must have a fortune.”

“I suppose that’s good for the women of Cheltenham. Louisa will be pleased, but she’ll have competition for his attention.”

Louisa hated any woman to usurp her and would undoubtedly try her best to keep the Earl’s interest. Mariah actually felt sorry for him. Louisa was a force to behold when she put her mind to something.

“I couldn’t care a flying pig what Louisa thinks,” Lucy stated. “I would like to know what you think about him.”

Mariah was a tad bewildered by that. “I only saw the man briefly. What could I possibly say about him? He did have a handsome set of green eyes and a full head of hair.”

Lucy’s eye’s sparkled with interest. “Oh, so you did get a good look at him. Why didn’t you say so?”

“Hair and eyes hardly maketh the man, Lucy,” Mariah admonished. “You know that.”

“Surely it doesn’t hurt for him to be physically appealing? No woman wishes to marry a man who looks like he was reared in the woods.”

“Marry?” Mariah repeated. “I certainly have no interest in meeting any bachelor. It matters not if he is the Prince Regent or the richest man in the world.”

Mariah was solely concerned about remaining healthy that night, and that was enough for her. Green-eyed earls were not on her agenda.

Chapter 4

“This was not part of the bargain,” John whispered furiously, greeting the next guest.

“It’s just one night,” Hugh returned.

“For now. Who knows what you’ll plan next?”

Hugh laughed. “Nothing you cannot handle. Your hand hasn’t fallen off, has it?”

“The night is still young. Has Martin arrived yet?”

The ball was in full swing, but the Dunns had yet to arrive. John rather liked Martin and enjoyed the man’s company. He was a bit of a buffer when Hugh launched into his ‘I’ve got so much money and don’t know what to do with it’ conversation. The man needed to calm down and simply be himself.

“No,” Hugh replied. “And neither has his pretty sister.”

“How do you know Martin’s sister is pretty? You haven’t seen her yet.”

“Gut feeling, I suppose,” said Hugh. “No man would be so protective of his sister unless she was something special to look at.”

The man was probably right. No one protected anything that wasn’t worth something. Unless Martin was the sort of brother that simply loved his sister and would guard her against anything and anyone, even if she was unattractive. John thought about it for a moment.

No, Lucy Dunn was likely a beauty with her fair share of broken hearts in her wake. What of Mariah Nightingale? Her fine eyes had intrigued John, but would the rest of her be worth attention? Martin had described her as dull and lifeless, but John knew Mariah hadn’t always been like that.

Guests kept arriving, but the only people John was interested in were nowhere to be seen. An hour had passed since the ball started, and the orchestra was into its seventh sheet of music. When did Martin and his party expect to arrive? The man didn’t seem like the tardy type, but perhaps his sister was.

“Tell me, which beauty do you prefer to dance with first?” Hugh asked. “Cheltenham certainly makes them.”

Hugh made women sound much like his beloved horses. He probably appreciated them just as much.

“I’m yet to be tempted to…” John’s words trailed off as two women walked in.

They were both beautiful, but one was clearly younger than the other.

John guessed them to be mother and daughter based on their similar features. Hugh's father broke away from the group of men he had been talking to and approached the women. John's stay in the Hatcher household had revealed Mr Hatcher's love of all things beautiful, including women. The man was an incorrigible flirt and didn't care who knew it.

"Good evening, Lady Tottenham," the man greeted. "I must say I haven't seen a pair of women so beautiful in all my years."

Lady Tottenham? If he wasn't mistaken, she was Mariah's stepmother. Was the young woman beside her Mariah? John peered a little more closely, noting the young woman had light brown eyes.

That's quite strange. I'm almost certain they were grey when I saw her earlier today. How on earth did I mistake them?

Perhaps the light of the day had altered his perception, but John found it peculiar to be so wrong. Grey was nothing like brown.

Hugh snickered beside him, nudging John in the ribs. "Father is at it again. Quite the ladies' man, isn't he?"

"How does your mother feel about it?"

Hugh shrugged. "She has learnt to accept it, I suppose. It's all harmless fun, isn't it?"

“Would that apply to your mother as well?” John asked.

The man frowned, missing the hand of the next guest. “You want my mother to flirt? That’s ridiculous!”

“Is it? ‘Tis harmless, after all. You said so yourself.”

“But it’s not the same,” Hugh protested. “My mother is a good woman. She doesn’t do things like that.”

John smiled at the double standard. He wasn’t one to advocate women’s rights in a marriage or society as a whole, but John noticed how stereotypes affected every relationship, be it as a sibling, parent, or spouse.

“By your own words, you admit that your father is a bad man.”

“I say now!” said Hugh, visibly annoyed. “What the devil are you on about? You can’t compare men to women like that. It’s different.”

“Yes,” John agreed. “So I’ve seen. How many people did you invite to the ball?” he asked, changing the topic. “The whole of Cheltenham?”

John felt like his arm and neck were about to fall off from all the bowing and shaking of hands. He barely had time in between for rest before the next guests appeared, wanting to introduce themselves to the Earl of Winchester. John hoped for Hugh’s sake that no other balls or events would be given in his honour. Once was enough.

“I’m not entirely certain,” the man answered. “Mother made the final call on the guestlist since she has taken the time to get to know the different families in town. She’s good at that sort of thing, as women should be. Father is usually too busy with his horses to care.”

“Unless it’s a beautiful woman,” John added.

Hugh laughed, slapping him on the shoulder. “Right you are. No one can resist a beautiful woman. Lady Tottenham’s daughter is certainly pretty. I saw you looking at her a little longer than the others. Does she interest you? Would you like me to have Father introduce you?”

“That won’t be necessary, thank you,” John refused politely. “I merely thought that I recognised her mother’s title.”

“You did. She is the Baroness of Tottenham, and that’s her daughter. Martin spoke about them earlier today.”

So, it was Mariah. John must truly have been blind to think the woman had grey eyes when they were so obviously brown right now. Furthermore, he felt nothing as he watched her from the corner of his eye. Earlier today, John had been intrigued and drawn to the woman, but tonight was a different story.

“I see,” he answered. “She appears in good health.”

Mariah Nightingale looked nothing like Martin had described. Where

was the dull and lifeless woman?

“Is that all you have to say?” said Hugh. “The woman is a fine specimen, and I think you should dance with her this evening. Why not ask to put your name on her dance card? I’m confident she will say yes.”

John didn’t know why, but he had no interest in dancing with Mariah. “We’ll see.”

He was surprised when Mr Hatcher walked over to them with both ladies on either arm.

“Ladies, may I introduce you to my son, Hugh Hatcher, and his friend, Lord Winchester?”

The women’s eyes lit up when they heard John’s title, barely acknowledging Hugh. The man smiled good-naturedly and didn’t seem too bothered by the apparent snub.

“‘Tis a pleasure to meet you, at last, my lord,” said Lady Tottenham. “My daughter and I have heard so much about you.”

“Indeed?” John replied. “I’m afraid I haven’t had the pleasure of hearing about you, my lady.”

“Oh, please, call me Charlotte,” the woman insisted, touching his arm lightly. “How are you finding Cheltenham?”

John briefly looked at the woman's hand, surprised at her forwardness. If the mother was like this, what should he make of the daughter? John glanced at the pretty woman, noticing the hungry look in her eyes. They looked ready for a meal, and he was the main course. John was struck again by how different the young woman seemed.

I may have only seen her for a little snippet of time, but the grey eyes I thought I saw were intelligent, striking, and somewhat sad. These eyes appear to want to devour me.

"It's undoubtedly a beautiful place. I'm glad Hugh invited me for the summer," John lied.

The town was lovely but wasn't any better than other picturesque towns, but what else could he have said? That he was tricked into coming here and would prefer to be at home?

"I'm glad to hear that," said the Baroness. "Mr Hatcher, would you mind getting my daughter and I something to drink? I feel positively parched."

John had the feeling Lady Tottenham was trying to get him alone and wanted the flirtatious older man to leave. There was every chance the Baroness wanted her daughter to get a piece of John before the other women had a chance to. John had been in these situations before and knew what signs to look for.

"Why don't I get you something?" John suggested. "It would be my

pleasure to serve you, ladies."

John didn't wait for them to protest but left, indicating for Hugh to follow him. The man's eyes were full of mirth and mischief.

"I'm glad you think this is amusing," John said as soon as they were out of earshot. "It's your fault that I'm here in the first place."

"I do not understand why you're upset," Hugh complained. "Two beautiful women are interested, and you wish to run away. They clearly wish to get to know you better. What harm is there in that?"

"I did not come to Cheltenham to be surrounded by a pack of wolves."

The only reason why Lady Tottenham and her daughter were interested in him was John's title.

"Wolves?" Hugh repeated. "They are hardly wolves. Perhaps kittens or birds. You often call me melodramatic, but it appears that you are the one who is overreacting. Simply calm down, get two glasses of champagne, and return to those two lovely ladies."

Easy for Hugh to say when he was not the object of interest, but perhaps John was being a bit dramatic. What was wrong with him? John had been fine until the women had arrived and he realised that Mariah was not as he had remembered her. It was ridiculous, really, but he was disappointed.

Shaking his head, John made his way to the drinks table and selected two fluted glasses.

“Why don’t I get us some of Father’s whiskey?” Hugh suggested. “I’m not in the mood for something bubbly.”

“Do you think that safe?”

Any whiskey brought into England was not done legally. It had to be smuggled out of Scotland under cover of darkness and kept out of the public eye. Most high-ranking English citizens did have the spirits stashed away in their liquor cupboard, but it wasn’t advertised.

“Who will know?” Hugh challenged. “No one will care what we’re drinking. Besides, they’re more interested in you. Whiskey will do you some good. Perhaps your mood will improve.”

John scowled. “Fine. Get the whiskey. I should get back before they think I ran away.”

Hugh laughed as he walked away, disappearing behind a door. Squaring his shoulders, John returned to the women, groaning at how their eyes glimmered with intent when they saw him. John handed Mariah her drink first and took another good look at her eyes. They were still brown but not remarkable.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said sweetly.

John forced a smile before handing Lady Tottenham her glass. “My apologies for the delay.”

“Oh, do not concern yourself over something so silly,” the Baroness insisted. “Mr Hatcher has been rather entertaining.”

“You’re too kind, Charlotte,” Mr Hatcher said, beaming. “I’m but a simple man in awe of your beauty.”

John found the blatant flirting to be irritating. “Is Mrs Hatcher nearby?” he asked. “I have not seen her for some time.”

Mr Hatcher appeared annoyed at the question. “She must be somewhere around here. Why don’t I show you around, Charlotte?”

“That is a lovely idea,” the woman agreed. “Can I entrust you with my daughter for a short while, my lord?” she asked.

John immediately knew this had been the Baroness’ plan all along. He was trapped and could do nothing but agree to it.

“Of course,” John begrudgingly replied. “Miss Nightingale will want for nothing.”

“Miss Nightingale?” asked Lady Tottenham with a frown. “This is–”

“I have just seen someone I wish to introduce you to, my dear Charlotte,” Mr Hatcher interrupted. “Shall we go?”

The Baroness nodded graciously, taking the man’s proffered arm. “Lead the way.”

John could do nothing but give Mariah polite attention. He was thinking about what to say to the woman when she spoke first.

“You look handsome, my lord,” she said coyly. “How dapper you are in your attire.”

Blatant flirtation. Cheltenham was full of it. “Thank you. Your hair is quite… elaborate.”

It wasn’t a compliment. The woman’s hair looked like a bird’s nest of curls, combs, and pearls. Why did women ruin their hair with such styles? A snake could easily lose itself in such a mess.

“Indeed?” the woman asked, touching her hair. “I’ve always been told that I have beautiful hair.”

John said nothing. To speak would be to encourage the woman. John looked around the room, noticing that some people had moved to the dance floor.

“Oh, look!” the woman exclaimed. “The dancing has started. I love to dance. Do you, my lord?”

John inwardly sighed. He would not be able to get away with not asking her to dance without appearing rude. Pinching his nose briefly, John tried to keep the reluctance out of his voice as he spoke.

“Would you…”

John stopped, his eyes looking to the entrance. Martin had just arrived, accompanied by two women standing close together as they spoke to each other. John couldn’t see them clearly at first, but he immediately recognised one of them as they stepped closer. Mariah? The grey eyes were unmistakable. Confused, John glanced at the woman beside him. How had he muddled up the women? They looked nothing alike!

Martin drew up to John, holding out his hand in greeting. John grasped it warmly, struggling to keep his eyes on the man. He just wanted to look at Mariah, but that would raise unwanted questions.

“Excuse our lateness,” Martin apologised. “My sister was adamant we couldn’t arrive until most of the guests were already in attendance.”

“Martin!” the one woman hissed.

Martin only laughed. “John, may I introduce my sister, Miss Lucy Dunn, and the Honourable Mariah Nightingale?”

Hugh returned just then, his eyes immediately fixating on Lucy. “Good

evening, Miss Dunn. Miss Nightingale," he added as an afterthought.

Both women curtsied, greeting him politely. They excused themselves, but John didn't want Mariah to leave him just yet.

"Miss Nightingale, would you do me the honour of dancing with me?" John asked.

He heard the false Mariah gasp beside him, but he paid her no mind. The real Mariah appeared startled, looking to her friend as though she were asking for advice.

"Would you care to dance with me, Miss Dunn?" asked Hugh.

Mariah and Lucy looked at each other, an unseen message evidently passing between them because Mariah turned back to John with an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but I cannot dance with you. I'm afraid I'm not well enough to do so but thank you for asking."

Too stunned to react, John watched her walk away.

Chapter 5

Mariah moved her head in time with the music being played, wishing she could dance along with the guests. Couple after couple gathered on the dance floor, unknowingly taunting her.

“You could be one of them,” Lucy commented.

Mariah shook her head. “I do not wish to tempt fate. Why did you not dance with Hugh when he asked? You should not have denied him on my account.”

“How could I leave my friend alone? We came here together, and we are going to stay together. Men shall never separate us.”

Mariah chuckled lightly. “I hardly think he was trying to separate us, Lucy. He simply seemed interested in you. I saw the way he looked at you.”

“How biased of you, Miss Nightingale,” Lucy accused. “You speak of Hugh Hatcher, but you leave out all mention of Lord Winchester. He was so interested that he completely ignored your wicked stepsister.”

Mariah grimaced. Louisa had not looked impressed and would blame Mariah for taking the Earl away from her. It was just as well that Mariah had declined Lord Winchester’s offer, or Louisa would have had much to say as soon as they were alone.

“If he were an intelligent man, he would give Louisa a dance or two,” Mariah declared. “She seems to have set her eyes on him.”

“But he is not interested in her,” Lucy argued. “If you will not dance with the Earl, why not dance with another gentleman? One that Louisa does not have her eye on.”

“And if I should grow weak? I promised Louisa that I would not shame her this evening. She did not wish for me to come to the ball, but I was determined to step out of the house. If something should happen, Lady Tottenham and Louisa will be displeased.”

Lucy made a noise of frustration. “Why must you always care what they think? When will you live for yourself?”

“Oh, Lucy,” Mariah cried. “Let’s not fight. I just wish to enjoy the ball. It matters not to me whether I dance or not.”

Lucy pursed her lips. “That is what you say, but I know you love to dance. At least, you used to. You seem healthy today, Mariah. Healthier than I’ve seen you for some time. Accept the next gentleman who asks you to dance.”

Mariah felt an odd sensation as though she were being watched. She slowly turned her head, her breath catching in her throat, when she saw the Baroness and Louisa observing her. Mariah dipped her head towards them, smiling awkwardly before looking away.

“What is it?” Lucy asked. “Why are you so tense?”

“Lady Tottenham and Louisa are watching me.”

“That’s hardly surprising. They’re always doing that. They do not wish for you to live your life.”

“Do not be so harsh,” Mariah begged. “Worrying about someone is not equivalent to keeping one from life. If anything, they wish to preserve my life.”

Lucy snorted. “They have you fooled, Mariah, but let’s not talk about them. I wish for you to dance this evening and intend to convince you to do so.”

“You often call me stubborn, but you are the one who refuses to take no for an answer.”

Lucy grinned. “That is because I am usually right and will not have anyone change my mind.”

Mariah sighed. Lucy meant well, but she didn’t understand what it meant to be ill so often. Mariah could count on one hand the number of times she had felt well this past month. The rest, she had simply been weak and tired. It was a daily battle that not only weighed on her physical body but her mind and emotions as well.

How could one not be depressed knowing that life could not be lived to the fullest? How could one not live in a state of melancholy when

there was no promise of health? Mariah tried to keep her spirits up, but it was challenging.

Lucy lightly touched her arm. “I’ve upset you, haven’t I?”

“No, you haven’t. I’ll tell you what, why don’t you dance for both of us? I’ll watch you and pretend that I am the one dancing.”

“Or you could dance yourself.”

“Just imagine how humiliating it would be if I fell halfway through the dance?”

“How wonderful would it be if it didn’t happen?” Lucy countered.

“Oh, hush now,” said Mariah. “If you will not dance, allow me to watch the others.”

Lucy nodded, showing the motion of locking her mouth with a key and putting it into her reticule. Mariah laughed. “You always go the extra mile.”

They focused on the guests, discussing the gracefulness of some and the blunders others made. It wasn’t criticism but a simple evaluation.

“Lady Lovell is coming our way,” Lucy mentioned. “I hope she doesn’t

come with her misleading gossip. I've been burned more times than I care to count."

"You shouldn't listen to gossip," Mariah admonished. "And be nice," she whispered as Lady Lovell approached them.

"My, Mariah!" the woman exclaimed. "How vibrant you look today. That blue is becoming on you. You as well, Lucy."

Mariah smiled. "Thank you, my lady. I hope you and your husband are well."

"Oh, yes. Lord Lovell never becomes sick, which is a blessing. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be sick day in and day out."

That was an insensitive answer, but Mariah didn't take it as such. "That is wonderful to hear. Those who have excellent health must never take it for granted."

"Right you are, my dear," the woman replied. "Well, let me be going. I have many others I wish to speak to before Lord Lovell decides to leave. He always goes so early."

Lady Lovell left in a cloud of sickeningly sweet rose perfume, the scent catching in Mariah's throat. She coughed delicately, fanning her face.

"Just her perfume is enough to cause one to be ill," Lucy complained. "What possesses anyone to apply that much on their person? A gentle

dab to your throat, wrist, and some to your hair should suffice."

Mariah didn't answer as another woman approached them. The corpulent woman bumped into several people, ignoring the angry stares she received. Mrs Potter was not one to worry about the opinions of others, but Mariah preferred her more than most. The woman was honest, motherly, and disliked Lady Tottenham. The Baroness usually ran a mile in the other direction whenever she saw Mrs Potter. Not many could make the Baroness run.

"Mariah! Lucy!" she cried. "I haven't seen a pair of finer ladies in all of Cheltenham. You look well, Mariah."

"You are too kind, Mrs Potter," said Lucy. "Are you with your daughters?"

"Unfortunately, no. They're with their grandparents in Bath. I'm alone this evening…unless you count my husband," she added as an afterthought.

"Please send our regards to Mr Potter," Mariah asked. "I have not seen him in some time."

"Why don't you come to see us?" the older woman suggested. "We would love to have you to tea. I do not like that Charlotte keeps you locked up."

Lady Tottenham would curl her upper lip to hear Mrs Potter refer to her as Charlotte. The Baroness was a great lover of her title and expected people to use it.

“Oh, she does not lock me up at all!” said Mariah, slightly distressed. “I stay inside for my own good.”

“Absolute hogwash, my dear!” Mrs Potter argued. “Sunlight is a wonderful thing, you know. Sunlight and fresh air go a long way to keeping one healthy and full of life. I must go, but I want you to know that my door is always open to you, child.”

Mrs Potter affectionately patted Mariah’s cheek and blew a kiss to Lucy before disappearing into the crowd. Although Mariah couldn’t see the short woman, she could see people abruptly moving out of the way and glaring behind them.

“She is a force to be reckoned with,” said Lucy. “No wonder I like her. Or it could be the fact that she dislikes the evil stepmother as much as I do.”

“You never stop, do you,” Mariah scolded. “Do not let Lady Tottenham hear you say that.”

“Hear who say what?” asked the Baroness appearing behind them.

Mariah jumped, taking Lucy’s hand. Feeling foolish, she let go of her friend’s hand. Mariah was somewhat scared of the Baroness, but most people were.

“Nothing, my lady. We were merely conversing about everyone’s

dresses, dancing, and–"

The woman waved her hand. "Very well. Tell me, how do you feel? Have you become tired yet?"

"No. I feel fine."

"Perhaps you should take a seat just in case. Come along, dear."

The Baroness didn't ask but demanded and ordered. Mariah had no other choice but to follow her, glad when Lucy came along. Lady Tottenham would probably be annoyed as she did not like Lucy much, but the young woman was stubborn enough to stand her ground.

The Baroness gestured for Mariah to sit on the first chair they found, ignoring Lucy.

"You must take a break every few minutes, dear," the woman said. "You must not overexert yourself."

"But I'm fine, my lady."

"Do not argue, Mariah. You are well aware that I know what is good for you. I promised your father that I would look after you, and I will. Did you drink enough of your tea? I noticed the teapot was quite full when you left."

Mariah couldn't help the thrill of fear that ran along her spine. She hadn't had a drop of the special tea.

"I had a full cup, my lady," Mariah lied.

"That isn't nearly enough."

"And yet she is well," Lucy countered. "Can you not see that, my lady?"

"I'm not blind," the Baroness snapped. "I can see what she looks like now, but there is no telling what may happen in the next minute or hour."

Lucy looked away, but not before Mariah saw her roll her pretty blue eyes.

"I will heed your warning, my lady," Mariah promised. "I know that you are worried about my health. I apologise if I have worried you."

"Good evening," greeted a good-looking young man, interrupting them.

"Good evening, Alistair," Lady Tottenham returned. "How are you?"

“Very well, my lady. Might I ask Miss Nightingale for the next dance?” the man said hopefully.

The Baroness turned to Mariah, her thin eyebrows so arched that they nearly touched her hairline.

“What do you say, Mariah? Would you like to dance with Alistair? He has asked ever so nicely.”

Mariah could read between the lines. Lady Tottenham did not want Mariah to accept, but the woman didn’t want to appear to influence or control anyone. She had to maintain the image of a kind-hearted stepmother.

“How kind of you, Alistair,” said Mariah. “But I cannot. Please forgive me.”

The man’s face fell. “Very well. Please excuse me.”

The Baroness waited until Alistair was well away before talking. “That was the right thing to do, dear. Now, I must leave and see how Louisa is faring, but please be aware of your health. Let us not have any mishaps this evening.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Lucy cursed under her breath as soon as Lady Tottenham had left. “What a she-devil.”

“Lucy! Name-calling is beneath you.”

“Perhaps for you, but I will name call where I see fit.” The young woman looked ahead, smiling. “It appears the Earl has not given up.”

Mariah jerked her head up. Sure enough, Lord Winchester was coming towards them with intent written all over his face. She gave an involuntary shiver and quickly looked away when their gazes collided.

“I was worried you had left, Miss Nightingale,” he said as he stepped up to them. “But then I saw Alistair Granger approach you and leave soon after looking rather disappointed. You rejected yet another poor man, although you were just speaking so energetically with Miss Dunn and your stepmother.”

“Talking is not the same as dancing, my lord,” Mariah replied.

“Right you are, but surely a little dance will not hurt?” he pressed.

Why was the man so insistent? What did it serve to push her about this matter? Mariah looked at her friend for support, quickly realising Lucy would be no help.

“I do not feel ready to tempt fate, my lord. I feel safer sitting on this chair.”

“Not even for a minute or two?”

Mariah could see that the Earl would not leave her unless she told him precisely why she was reluctant to dance with him or anyone else.

“It was at a ball similar to this that I believed I could take a chance and dance.” Mariah’s cheeks darkened with colour as she recalled her embarrassment. “I stumbled halfway through and had to leave the dance floor.”

The Earl’s brows knitted together. “But that was your partner’s fault for not helping you to cover it and overcome it. Dance with me, and I’ll prove to you that the right partner makes all the difference.”

Lord Winchester held out his hand, but Mariah held back. Could he be right?

“An earl has never been rejected twice, Miss Nightingale.”

So, this was about his pride? She should have known. “I’m happy to set a new record, my lord. If you will excuse me?”

Mariah stood up and would have walked away, but the Earl unexpectedly took her hand.

“Please, forgive me,” he asked. “I did not mean to anger you. Please, dance with me and see for yourself that I will support you should

anything happen.”

Mariah looked at her hand in his. Usually, her first reaction would be to pull away, but she didn’t. That was strange, but what Mariah found most peculiar was the sense of safety she felt around the Earl. Mariah felt that she could trust him.

“Very well, my lord. I accept.”

Chapter 6

Lucy wanted nothing more than to see her friend happy. She recalled the days Mariah was full of life and energy, wonderful times that Lucy had taken for granted. Not once had she ever guessed that Mariah would suddenly fall ill after her father's death. It had been a heavy blow for everyone who loved Mariah.

This evening was a wonderful surprise for Lucy, and undoubtedly for Mariah as well. The woman was smiling and enjoying her dance with the Earl, just like old times. Could this mean Mariah was finally regaining her health? Lucy hoped so.

The dance set came to an end with Mariah performing a move Lucy had not seen in some time. This gained her applause from those around her, causing Mariah to laugh as she curtsied and allowed John to lead her off the floor. Lucy had never felt more proud. Her eyes were drawn to another figure leaving the floor, but this person was not happy in the least. Louisa was barely acknowledging her clearly bewildered partner as she was too busy glowering at Mariah.

"I'm not at all surprised," Lucy muttered.

Louisa was jealous of Mariah and always had been. Lucy looked between Mariah and the Earl talking to each other and Louisa's angry countenance. Wouldn't it be wonderful and satisfying to rub Mariah's success in Louisa's face?

"It certainly would," Lucy told herself, grinning.

She left her position and sauntered over to where the woman stood staring at Mariah and Lord Winchester.

“Aren’t you just so happy for your stepsister?” Lucy asked the woman. “Mariah was always the centre of attention when she was well. It looks like that has happened once again.”

Louisa turned to her sharply, narrowing her eyes. “What do you want?”

“Oh, I thought you might need some company. You looked all alone.”

Louisa rolled her eyes. “Do you expect me to believe that? We are not friends.”

“Thank goodness for that!” Lucy exclaimed. “Who would need an enemy when they have a friend like you? Do you have any friends?”

“Is that meant to be amusing?”

“Is it?”

Louisa huffed. “Why don’t you leave me alone? I do not have any issues with you.”

“But you certainly have one with Mariah,” Lucy challenged. “I saw your reaction when you realised she had successfully completed a dance set without any mishap. Furthermore, you’re jealous that the Earl asked her to dance, and not you.”

Louisa’s face darkened. “Do not poke your nose into matters that do not concern you.”

“I have known Mariah longer than you have!” Lucy pointed out. “How can you tell me that anything that has to do with her is not my concern?”

“You are just a friend, but I am her family,” the woman spat out as though the very thought of being family with Mariah was torture.

Lucy laughed harshly. “Ha! You do not know the meaning of family. I hope one day everyone is aware of what Mariah has to go through at the hands of you and your mother.”

Hatred flashed in the woman’s face, but she quickly covered it with a calm smile. It was unnerving how quickly Louisa was able to mask her emotions.

“I do not know what you are talking about, my dear Lucy,” the woman replied sweetly. “Mama and I only wish to see Mariah healthy and well. Please excuse me.”

Louisa looked like a sulking child as she walked away, her back straight and stiff.

“Horrid woman,” Lucy declared.

Louisa had probably run off looking for her mother so she could complain about how terrible Lucy had been to her. Or perhaps the woman’s anger at Mariah would eclipse any negative emotions she might feel towards Lucy. Louisa was both a calculated and unpredictable woman given to bouts of anger at the drop of a pin. Who knew what was bubbling and boiling in that cauldron-like head of hers?

Sometimes, Lucy imagined Lady Tottenham and Louisa cooking up poison in a back room to feed it to Mariah. Of course, Lucy didn’t believe they would actually do that, but that was the image she had of them.

Lucy turned her attention to Mariah and Lord Winchester again, feeling a quick smile stretch her lips. The two had only just met, but they suited each other well. Would Mariah allow herself to simply enjoy the moment, or was she worried about what her stepmother or Louisa were thinking?

Lucy was tempted to go over and ensure that Mariah would not sabotage herself, but she held back. Mariah appeared to be handling herself rather well. It might be far more interesting to let things play out on their own.

“I’m in need of something to drink. Shall I get it myself or ask one of these handsome suitors?”

Lucy could play the damsel in distress with the best of them, but she

enjoyed her independence more. Well, as much as Lucy could have with an overprotective father and brother while living in a patriarchal society. Still, Lucy wouldn't change them for the world.

Seeing Mariah go through the grief of losing her father had made Lucy appreciate her own family so much more. Lucy hoped Mariah would one day find all the happiness she deserved. The woman was long overdue.

Where was her mother? Louisa stomped through the throng of guests, hardly able to contain her temper. Her mother always told her to breathe through her teeth, but they were clenched so tightly that no air could pass through.

Everything is always about Mariah! Mariah, Mariah, Mariah! Why did Mama ever agree to let her come? I hate it when she draws all the attention to herself.

Mariah should have been locked up in her room like Louisa had suggested. What did people see in Mariah? She was just a dull woman who bored everyone. However, today Mariah was the centre of attention and had the Earl eating out of the palm of her hand. How had this happened?

"Where is she?" Louisa muttered angrily.

Louisa's patience was wearing thin. A mother was supposed to be there when her daughter needed her, not enjoying herself in the

company of old people. Louisa wished she didn't have to put up with the ancient people at all. Why couldn't a ball be filled with young people like herself? It would be a lot more exciting. Of course, Mariah could not be present, or that would defeat the entire purpose of having an ideal ball.

Was Mariah still enjoying herself? Her sickness should have taken over now. Louisa looked over her shoulder but couldn't see the other woman anywhere.

"Where is she?" she wondered aloud.

It would be wonderful if Mariah decided to leave, but that would be too good to be true. Louisa's stepsister was like a leech that one couldn't scrape off.

Pausing the search for her mother, Louisa went back the way she came. She just needed to see what Mariah was doing at this moment. But what if that annoying Lucy was watching? That girl wouldn't think twice about saying something horrible.

Louisa looked around to make sure Lucy wasn't watching somewhere and found her talking to a group of men. They should keep her busy for some time. Now, where was Mariah?

Louisa spotted her still talking to the Earl. Everything within Louisa wanted to snatch the Earl away and throw Mariah out of the ball, but some things were just not possible. It was all unfair, really.

Sending one last hated look in Mariah's direction, Louisa resumed her

search for her absent mother. Life was supposed to be easier with her mother as Baroness, but having Mariah as a stepsister had ruined any chances Louisa had of truly gaining the love and adoration of everyone worth knowing. Mariah's sickness had given Louisa room to spread her wings, but Louisa was doomed if the woman's health was returning to her.

Louisa finally found her mother discussing the follies of youth with Lady Farrow.

"A young woman should be married as soon as she is of age," the Viscountess commented. "Or she is bound to fall to the charms of a scoundrel. Did you hear of the vicar's daughter who ran away with a soldier? Most disturbing news, I tell you. Her mother was quite distraught, as you would imagine."

"A soldier!" Louisa's mother exclaimed. "Did he at least have a good fortune? Perhaps four or five thousand a year?"

"I do not know," said Lady Farrow. "Perhaps if I had learnt of the young man's name. I simply know they came through town this past winter. No one expected it to happen."

Louisa couldn't be less bothered by the gossip. What did it matter to her if some foolish woman decided to throw her life away on a soldier? Louisa had her eyes and heart set on marrying someone important, a person who would elevate her status. Her mother had done the same thing by marrying the Baron, but Louisa wanted to aim even higher.

Ever since hearing about the Earl of Winchester spending his summer in Cheltenham, Louisa had made it her mission to get close to him and

make him fall madly in love with her. Why wouldn't he? Louisa was beautiful and knew just what it took to be a Countess. As far as she was concerned, she was born to be nothing less than a Countess.

"Mama," Louisa called, tired of waiting for the women to finish their conversation.

The Baroness turned to her with a ready smile. "Oh, my dear! I did not see you standing there. Should you not be dancing? Your dance card was quite full when I last saw it. Louisa is always so popular at these things," the Baroness told the Viscountess. "I can hardly keep up!"

Louisa did have a partner for the next dance, but she had other more important matters to address, namely her horrid stepsister. Why couldn't the Baron have had a son or no child at all?

"How fortunate you are to be comely, Louisa," Lady Farrow commented. "I'm surprised you have not married yet."

The Viscountess was smiling, but Louisa heard the mocking tone in her voice. Louisa had received several proposals in the last year, but none of the suitors had been good enough for her.

"Louisa must carefully pick her husband," her mother said, sounding irritated. "Surely you understand that. I do not wish to make the mistake of marrying my daughter into a family with a stealing problem or with some other hidden scandal that will affect Louisa's life."

Louisa chuckled, covering it up with a cough. The Viscountess was well-known to have long fingers and would steal the coat off one's back if she could. One had to be vigilant whenever she called on a person, or several items may be reported missing once the woman left.

"Yes, of course," Lady Farrow hastily replied. "We cannot have our daughters marry just anyone. God forbid. Would you excuse me? I've just seen someone I must talk to."

Lady Farrow scurried away, taking her ghastly scent with her.

"I do not know how you can stand her presence," Louisa said. "She's nothing but a hypocrite."

"But she is a hypocrite worth knowing, dear," her mother explained. "You cannot burn your bridges when a person could be useful."

Louisa didn't know how a foul-smelling thief could be helpful, but she didn't argue. Her mother was a wise woman and always had a good reason for everything.

"I'll take your word for it," said Louisa. "But I haven't come looking for you to discuss Lady Farrow, Mama. We have a problem on our hands."

"Oh? What sort of problem?"

"I told you to keep Mariah at home, to not allow her to come to the

ball, but you didn't listen to me," Louisa accused.

"I warned her against coming, dear. What else could I have done? Lock her up?"

"Yes!" Louisa exclaimed. "Lock her up and throw away the key."

"Keep your voice down, Louisa," her mother warned, looking around. "Someone might hear. Do you want that?"

"No," Louisa said sulkily. "But I just cannot stand Mariah, Mama. Do you know what she is doing right at this moment?"

"What could she possibly be doing to upset you like this? I left her sitting on a chair with that Dunn girl."

Louisa snorted. "She is not sitting anymore. In fact, she was just dancing with Lord Winchester. You promised me that I would be the one to dance with him first!"

"What? Where?"

"Just beyond the crowd there," Louisa replied, pointing. "Mariah was talking to him when I last saw her. They appear to be getting along well, and I don't like it. She even received a hand of applause after the set. That has never happened to me! This isn't fair at all, Mama. Mariah is stealing all of the attention again."

The Baroness' face hardened. "That girl does not know when to stop, but never mind that, my dear. This is just one moment. Mariah is never healthy long enough to cause much damage. With any luck, she'll fail in strength while talking to the Earl and embarrass herself."

"Oh, how I wish that would happen! I cannot stand seeing her so happy and smug. She has always thought she is better than me just because her father was a Baron."

The Baroness took Louisa's hand, patting it. "Do not fret, dear. She may be the daughter of a Baron, but you will be the wife of an earl. You will be the Countess of Winchester and have all the prestige that such a title will bring. Simply have patience and let your mother work."

Louisa grinned, hugging her mother. "How I love you, Mama."

Perhaps Louisa could wait a bit longer.

Chapter 7

John had wanted to keep to himself as much as possible, but Mariah had turned that on its head. She laid a light hand on his forearm, pointing at a couple.

“That’s Mrs Potter and Mr Potter, two of my favourite people in the whole world. They were good friends with my mother and father and watched me grow up. Would you like to meet them?”

Not really, but Mariah seemed to want that. “They must be wonderful if you like them.”

“You do not know me well enough to say that, my lord,” she replied. “For all you know, I could be taking you to your doom.”

“If you were, you wouldn’t be advertising it,” John countered.

“Unless I was confident that you would follow me regardless of what I say.”

John raised his eyebrows. “Are you?”

Mariah smiled. “I think your company is answer enough.”

John laughed, attracting the curious attention of some guests. “I suppose you’re right, Miss Nightingale. Lead the way.”

They weaved through the crowd, briefly greeting people on the way. Or rather, Mariah greeted, and John agreed to whatever she said. It was an odd feeling to be led about by a woman John didn’t really know and having her ease him into conversations with the locals, but John didn’t mind. He was actually enjoying himself.

Mrs Potter spotted them before they reached her, the woman’s eyes assessing John with keen interest. She nudged her husband, a portly fellow of perhaps fifty or sixty, drawing his attention as well. Mr Potter appeared surprised and said something to his wife that made her smile. John had a feeling it was about him and hoped it was favourable. It felt important to be liked by the people Mariah so obviously respected.

“Mariah, dear!” exclaimed Mr Potter, taking her hands and kissing her cheek. “Mrs Potter told me you were here, but I didn’t believe it at first. You look lovely, my dear. It’s wonderful to see you out and about.”

“Thank you, Mr Potter,” said Mariah. “I’m happy to be out and seeing everyone. It has been too long. May I introduce Lord Winchester? He is in Cheltenham staying with the Hatchers for the summer.”

“Ah, so this is the famous Earl I’ve heard about?” Mr Potter declared, taking John’s hand in a vigorous shake. “How do you do, young man?”

Feeling slightly jolted, John gave a short bow of his head. “Very well, sir. I’m glad to make your acquaintance. Miss Nightingale has spoken

so highly of you."

"We feel the same about our dear Mariah," Mrs Potter said. "How do you find Cheltenham, Lord Winchester? I understand you've been here for a week or so."

John had created a generic answer to the question because everyone tended to ask him this very thing, but he found himself straying outside its boundaries.

"It's a lovely town, but I have yet to grow attached to it."

Mrs Potter smiled like a woman who knew a secret. "That can be remedied with the right company. Do you truly intend to stay the entire summer? That's rather long."

John nodded. "I gave my word to Hugh that I would remain with his family all summer."

"A man of his word," said Mr Potter. "I like that. Too many young men are flighty these days. They say one thing but do another. Most cannot deliver on the smallest of promises. In my day, a man's word was his honour. We would keep it until the death."

"My father taught me the importance of honouring one's word," John shared. "The Blackmore men do not go back on any promise."

"Blackmore, you say?" asked Mr Potter. "Are you by any chance

related to a Thomas Richard Blackmore? He lived in Cornwall, but I understand he is now in London."

The world appeared to be a small place because the man Mr Potter spoke of was none other than his uncle. He said as much to the older man, making him laugh in delight.

"How is the old chap? Thomas, George, and I were great friends when we were young lads. George is the late Lord Tottenham, Mariah's father."

Surprised, John glanced at Mariah, who appeared just as startled. What were the odds of their families knowing each other?

"I never knew that, Mr Potter," said Mariah. "I don't think I recall Papa talking about Mr Blackmore."

"I know," the man agreed. "When your father married your mother, Thomas broke off all ties. He was in love with your mother and couldn't bear seeing her happy with your father. It was all regrettable, but there you go. Did Thomas ever marry?" Mr Potter asked John. "I heard rumours, but once I married the love of my life, I didn't bother to find out."

Had John's uncle married Mariah's mother, Mariah might have been his cousin. John didn't like that idea at all.

"My uncle did marry," John told him. "He has three daughters."

“Just as we do, my love,” Mrs Potter pointed out. “Do you have any siblings, my lord?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“How sad,” the woman sympathised. “Mariah is an only child as well. Of course, that changed when George married Charlotte,” Mrs Potter said with veiled disgust. “She came with one daughter. Perhaps you’ve met her?”

John had undoubtedly met her. In fact, he had somehow mistaken her for Mariah, which had been ridiculous on his part because the women looked nothing alike.

“I have met Miss Cull,” he confirmed and said nothing more on the subject.

Louisa Cull was not a woman John would want to be around. She was blatantly flirtatious and appeared self-centred. John may have only been around the woman for a few minutes, but they were enough to tell him that she wasn’t the sort of person for him.

Mariah was the one he felt comfortable with, the one he found it easy to talk to. John usually had trouble talking to people because he always worried that they only wished to be around him because of what they could directly or indirectly get out of him. Unfortunately, John had experienced this far too many times not to be wary of any stranger.

John and Mariah eventually moved on from the Potters, strolling away from the crowd until they found an area not too densely filled with people.

“Everyone seems happy to see you,” he commented.

“I’m as equally happy to see them,” she admitted. “I rarely see people, but on the bright side are all the books I can read. I spend a lot of time reading, and if I feel up to it, painting. Do you like to read, my lord? Most men shy away from it for fear of appearing bookish.”

John wasn’t terribly interested in reading books, but a few stood out for him. He listed them, surprised when Mariah admitted to reading all but one of them.

“Why is it surprising?” she asked. “Are they not good books?”

“That is not what I meant. Most of them are concerned with subjects that women do not traditionally find interesting. You’re the first woman I’ve met to have read them.”

“You are not surrounded by the right women, my lord,” Mariah stated. “However, the company you keep says a lot about your character. Do you enjoy surrounding yourself with women who do not bother with your interests?”

John had to laugh. No one had asked him such a question before, and John found it delightful and refreshing.

“I do not surround myself with anyone, Miss Nightingale,” he replied. “They surround me.”

“Oh? Do they tie you down?”

“No,” he said slowly, not quite catching on to what Mariah was implying. “Why would they tie me down?”

“You spoke as though you do not have any choice but to remain in their company, and yet you have feet to walk away. Why remain in the company of people that do not add any value to your life?”

Mariah made perfect sense, but his situation wasn’t as clear cut as she thought. People assumed that nobles could do whatever they wanted to, but that wasn’t the truth. One’s family image had to always be considered, and that dictated how a person behaved in front of others. Walking away from people might be misconstrued as snubbing them, meaning social suicide if one was not powerful or rich enough. John was wealthy and his family powerful, but he was still too young to afford to anger influential people. It could hurt his eventual political career.

“That is complicated,” John finally said. “However, I am here with you, and you appear to be the right sort of person.”

“Are you certain of that?” Mariah asked with a twinkle in her eye. “Am I not like the rest of them?”

“The fact that you’re asking the question is answer enough. The wrong

sort never thinks they are in the wrong."

"How philosophical of you, my lord," Mariah teased.

"Not at all. There is no philosophy in common sense."

"Others would argue against that, my lord. Philosophy is profound wisdom, which leads to knowledge. Having understanding and knowledge leads to discernment which naturally impacts your common sense."

Mariah sounded like a scholar, and no wonder when she spent most of her time reading. It had to be a lonely life surrounded by books that could not see, touch, taste, hear, and speak. John believed in balance, and Mariah was sorely out of it.

"You are wise beyond your years, Miss Nightingale. I would have you live a little more like the young woman you are."

Mariah coloured, looking away. Had he said something wrong, or was she looking at something? John followed Mariah's eyes, inwardly groaning when he noticed Hugh and Martin approaching. What did the men want? John was having a wonderful time with Mariah and didn't want any interruptions. Their arrival would undoubtedly take Mariah's attention away.

"Miss Nightingale!" cried Hugh. "We should have known that you have bewitched our friend and taken him away from us. I do not blame him, for you are very lovely."

Mariah smiled, a faint blush still staining her round cheeks. “I’m afraid I am not good at enchantments. I tried to be rid of Lord Winchester some time ago, but I must have added a double dose of eye of newt to my cauldron. Or was it three locks of hair instead of two? I forget.”

Hugh roared with laughter, openly admiring the young woman. “Capital humour is most refreshing in a woman, Miss Nightingale. No wonder John has spent most of this evening at your side despite the ball being given in his honour. I would also remain by your side if it meant I could listen to your voice.”

John shot Hugh a stern look. Why was the man flirting so openly? “Miss Nightingale has thoughtfully introduced me to several interesting people. I’m indebted to her,” John explained.

“Mariah knows most people in Cheltenham,” Martin commented. “Lord Tottenham used to give many parties…” The man trailed off as he looked at Mariah, his eyes almost twice their original size. “I’m sorry, Mariah. I didn’t mean to remind you of… well.”

Mariah’s eyes held some sadness, but her smile was genuine. “Do not fret, Martin. I often recall those days as well. ‘Tis bittersweet.”

“I can think of other things that are bitter,” Martin added, looking ahead.

Lady Tottenham was fast approaching them, much to John’s dismay. He noticed that Mariah had tensed up beside him and was watching her stepmother warily.

“I’ve been looking for you all over the ballroom,” the Baroness immediately chided. “I was worried something had happened to you.”

“I’m fine, Mother Nightingale,” Mariah assured her.

Mother Nightingale? Why not just Mother? And why was Mariah so uncomfortable with the woman? She had been fine a moment ago.

“You say that now, but there’s no telling what might happen as the night progresses. You’re weak, my dear. A weak person should not overexert themselves.”

John assessed Mariah, concluding that she looked in good health. What on earth was the Baroness on about?

“I shall sit down if I feel unwell,” said Mariah.

“But then you shall be the problem of these lovely gentlemen,” Lady Tottenham complained. “You do not wish to do that, do you? I can arrange for the carriage to take you home right now before anything should happen.”

“No, Mother Nightingale,” replied Mariah, her voice small and without the confidence John had come to briefly know.

“I know that you wish to be here, but we must not bother the guests,” the Baroness continued. “It wouldn’t be fair to them to deal with a sickly woman. Ill health can put such a damper on a good night. I know that you’re a sensible girl and would not want to ruin the ball for everyone else.”

Lady Tottenham was speaking kindly, but her words were nothing but insults. Poor Mariah looked uncomfortable and uncertain as she clasped her hands before her and slumped her shoulders. John felt that he needed to step in.

“I’m afraid that is not possible, Charlotte,” he said. “You see, Mariah has promised the last dance to me, and she cannot break her word.”

John felt Mariah look at him in surprise but didn’t argue. He hoped she would keep it that way. This Baroness needed to be put in her place.

“Is this true, Mariah?”

“Yes, Mother Nightingale,” Mariah lied.

“I see,” the older woman said, none too pleased. “Please be careful,” she said before walking off.

John led Mariah to the floor some minutes later, immediately asking about her health.

“Your stepmother made it seem as though you are on your deathbed,” John commented. “Is your health that poor?”

Mariah nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. I often grow sick without warning. It can be tiring for those around me.”

Mariah always seemed concerned with those around her than herself. Looking at her now, no one would think that Mariah had an illness, leading John to believe her sickness was exaggerated.

“Tired or not, I would enjoy your company,” he said truthfully.

“That is kind of you, my lord. Thank you.”

Mariah didn’t look like she believed him, but John meant every word. Perhaps Cheltenham was going to be better than he had initially believed after all.

Chapter 8

Mariah left little crumbs under her bed, hoping she could coax the little mouse to come out. She had noticed it four days ago when it ate her biscuit and left a trail to its tiny hole. Mariah's first reaction had been to call a servant to remove it, but she soon thought better of it. The small thing just wanted a warm home and food to eat. Could Mariah really blame it? What if it had a family?

"Come out, little mouse," she cooed, staring at the hole.

Mariah was flat on her belly, resting her chin on her hands as she patiently waited for the creature. Patience was a quality Mariah had in abundance. What else could one expect of a woman who was waiting for her health to return? For her life to be normal again? Perhaps this life was her new normal, but Mariah didn't want it to be.

A tiny nose poked out of the hole, its long whiskers moving as the mouse smelt the air. It must have seen the crumbs.

"Come here, you poor thing. I won't hurt you."

Perhaps Mariah could keep it as a pet if the mouse allowed it. The Baroness did not allow Mariah to keep any animals, for Louisa detested them. It was sad, really. A pet would have brightened up Mariah's day and brought life to Nightingale Manor.

A tiny paw appeared, and then another until half of the mouse was visible.

“My! How adorable you are. You are the epitome of the perfect mouse.”

This one had a lovely brown coat with white paws and ears as though it wore shoes and earmuffs.

“Are you hungry? I’ve left bread for you.”

The mouse paused, its nose wriggling as it watched her warily. Mariah didn’t move at all for fear of startling the little thing and forcing it back into its hole. It hopped several paces, picking up the first crumb with much hesitation.

“Eat up,” Mariah whispered.

Perhaps the animal understood her because it gobbled it up quickly and moved onto the next crumb with equal speed. Mariah chuckled softly, watching it go through every single bit of bread she had arranged on the floor.

“That’s better. You might as well listen to me while you eat. I need a listening ear.”

It was silly to talk to a creature about her problems, but it was better than always talking to herself. Louisa was not interested in having a relationship with Mariah, and the Baroness was a rather frightful woman to converse with. Mariah always felt a sense of inadequacy

whenever she was around the older woman.

“I’ve always tried to be the best stepdaughter one could ever wish for, but I cannot seem to please her.”

The Baroness only seemed happy when Mariah was quiet and in her room recovering from a sudden bout of illness.

“She wishes to see me well,” she told the mouse. “And hates it when I overextend myself.”

Although she worked to convince herself of this, Mariah felt the falsehood in it. One could never be quite certain of Lady Tottenham’s intentions. Mariah had not been out of the house for two weeks, not even to see Lucy.

“She’s convinced that the ball has done me much damage, and I partly agree with her. I did feel rather tired the next day.”

Mariah had taken her usual tea from the apothecary and laid down to rest. When she awoke, she found herself even more tired than before. It was strange as Mariah had woken up that morning feeling quite refreshed. Well, the illness never warned her when it would attack, so what did it matter if it made itself known upon wakening or hours later?

“I had a lovely time at the ball, little mouse. Lord Winchester was a wonderful dance partner, and he had such patience with me. I hoped to see him again, but I have not been out since the ball.”

It was to his credit that the Earl did not back down when Mariah had repeatedly rejected him. She had been so confident that Lord Winchester would reject her as soon as he witnessed her handicap, and Mariah was still worried about it, but he had been so lovely. Not once had Mariah felt like the burden Louisa often quoted her as being.

“Of course, that can still change, but I’ll never have the opportunity to find out unless I see the Earl again.”

Another ball was to be held this evening, and Mariah was determined to go. She did not feel as well as she did for the last ball, but perhaps she would get better by the evening. Mariah wanted to see the Earl again, speak with him, and perhaps dance again. How lovely that would be! Mariah had felt like she was floating just like in her dream, but this time, it had ended beautifully. Could that happen again? She hoped so.

The mouse was finally done eating and returned to its hole without so much as a backward look. Mariah laughed. “I feel used, but I don’t mind. I’ll be sure to bring some seeds and nuts the next time. I read that you’re omnivorous and will even eat your own kind if you’re hungry enough. I hope to never see you do it, but one can never be sure. I suppose I should get off the floor now.”

Mariah got to her knees and immediately regretted doing it so fast. She shut her eyes as the world spun around her, falling hard on her hands and jarring her teeth. Crying out in pain, surprised when two hands touched her shoulders.

“What happened, Miss Nightingale?”

“Oh, Tessa,” Mariah cried in relief, slowly opening her eyes. “I tried to stand up too quickly.”

“Again? Oh, Miss. Let me help you up.”

Tessa placed her hands under Mariah’s armpits and lifted her. It took a few tries, but Mariah eventually got to her feet.

“Thank you, Tessa. I seem to be a little weaker than I thought.”

“You should be in bed, Miss,” the maid complained. “Why were you on the floor?”

“If I tell you, do you promise not to hurt him? Or her–I’m not sure yet.”

Tessa’s eyes narrowed. “Are you up to anything? I do not want the Baroness to scold you.”

Mariah didn’t want that either. The woman had the ability to make a person regret their very life without ever raising her voice. It was a skill Mariah hoped never to have.

“I doubt she will learn that I have a mouse in my room. It’s too small to be detected.”

Tessa gave a little squeal, clapping a hand over her mouth as she searched the floor.

“It’s harmless,” Mariah insisted.

“Oh, Miss,” the woman cried. “You know that I cannot stand mice and anything else smaller than a cat.”

“You won’t have to take care of it, and I doubt you’ll ever see it,” Mariah assured. “I only ask you to never tell anyone about it.”

The maid nodded, but she still looked terrified. Sighing, Mariah thought to change the subject. Tessa couldn’t leave the room frightened, or the Baroness would undoubtedly find out and order the mouse to be killed.

“Did you need to see me about something?”

Tessa frowned. “See you? Oh, yes! This letter has come for you,” the maid said, pulling it out of her apron pocket. “Miss Cull asked me to give it to you.”

Louisa? That meant the woman probably read the letter already. Mariah’s stepsister did not understand what privacy meant, at least not when it came to Mariah.

“Thank you, Tessa. That will be all.”

The maid left, her eyes still searching the floor. Hopefully, the Baroness was in her parlour or the conservatory.

Observing the letter, Mariah found a tiny flower pressed into the seal. It had no name save her own and no address to indicate where it had come from. It certainly wasn't a letter from Lucy. Mariah opened it, reading with growing surprise and pleasure.

Dear Miss Nightingale,

I had a delightful time with you at the Hatcher's ball. I could not have asked for a better companion.

I know that this may seem forward of me, but I hold you in the highest regard and feel that we may have something special brewing between us. I wish to see you again at your earliest convenience. Will you attend the ball this evening? I fear I shall never be happy again until I see your lovely face. Be kind to your dear servant and say you'll come.

The letter wasn't signed, but Mariah had a good idea who it was from. In fact, she was reasonably certain. She smiled, holding the letter to her chest. The Earl wished to see her again!

"I simply must go now! Lord Winchester expects to see me. I would not want to disappoint him."

Excited, Mariah pulled on the rope in her room. The ball was mere

hours away, and she wasn't even sure what she was going to wear.

Tessa returned to the room with evident reluctance. "Yes, Miss?"

"Would you bring me my tea and have a bath drawn for me? Oh, and please ensure the tea is a little stronger today. I need my strength for this evening."

"Are you going somewhere?" the woman asked curiously, the mouse temporarily forgotten about.

"Yes, this evening's ball. I wasn't sure about attending it, but now I must. Get my tea and return quickly to help me prepare."

"Yes, Miss."

Mariah went straight to her armoire and pulled out several gowns. She had lost some weight, so most didn't fit her as they used to, but she still had two that had always been snug fitting. Mariah looked them over with a critical eye and decided they would have to do. Perhaps they were not as high fashion as she wanted them to be, but Mariah didn't have much of a choice. She had worn the newest dress for the Hatcher's ball, and even that had not been as beautiful as those of the other women.

"I see you've decided to go to the ball," Louisa said from the doorway.

Mariah spun around, dropping the dress she was holding. "Louisa! I

didn't know you were there. Do you need something?"

"I came to see if you needed anything. Do you?"

Since when did Louisa care if she needed anything? "No, thank you."

"Does my mother know you're going?"

"Not yet, but she does know I was thinking about it."

"Do you think you'll be well enough?" Louisa asked. "You might not be as lucky as you were the last time."

"I'm aware of that, but I'll make sure to drink my tea. I'm confident I'll be fine."

That was a lie. Mariah was worried her illness might worsen this evening, but she had to take that chance. The Earl wanted to see her again, and Mariah felt the same way.

Louisa shrugged, smirking as she walked away. Why did Louisa insist on bothering her for no reason? Mariah had tried so hard to cultivate a sibling relationship with the woman, but Louisa was determined to treat her like an enemy.

Perhaps the woman felt some type of way about Mariah being her

father's true daughter, but that didn't mean the Baron had treated her as anything less. Louisa had been doted upon and treated as a blood daughter.

The young woman hadn't always been like this. Mariah and Louisa had gotten on well while the Baron was alive, but everything had changed seemingly overnight when he passed on. But there was no use dwelling over the matter now. Mariah had a ball to get ready for.

Mariah looked at the clock on the wall, her fingers tapping away on the arm of the armchair. She had been ready nearly an hour ago, but the Baroness and Louisa had yet to appear. What could be taking them so long? Mariah thought to call a servant when the women walked into the parlour wearing dresses she didn't recognise.

"You both look lovely," said Mariah.

"Thank you, dear," the Baroness replied. "Is that an old dress you're wearing?"

Mariah touched her gown, smoothing a little wrinkle. "It's not that old, my lady. It's one of the only dresses that still fits me."

"How unfortunate, dear. Perhaps we should have a dressmaker in to take your measurements and make you a few dresses," the older woman suggested.

Mariah brightened. It had been so long since she'd had a dress made. "That would be wonderful, my lady. Thank you."

"You're too kind, Mama," said Louisa. "But why make her dresses when she hardly goes anywhere?"

The Baroness smiled. "That is true. We wouldn't want to waste any money, now would we? Your father didn't leave much, Mariah."

Lady Tottenham often said that, but her spending habits didn't fit her story. Mariah's father had been good with money and abhorred senseless gambling. She knew he would have left a substantial amount for his family. However, there was no use arguing about it.

"I understand, my lady. Shall we go?"

Mariah stood up but fell back when her knees gave way. A wave of intense exhaustion washed over her, dulling her mind. No, this couldn't be happening right now!

"Are you feeling unwell, Mariah?" the Baroness questioned. "Perhaps you should stay at home."

Neither Louisa nor her mother came forward to help Mariah. They simply stood at the door, watching her pitifully.

"No, no, I'll be just fine, my lady. Please, do not concern yourself."

“You’re dead on your feet!” Louisa cried. “Stay at home where you belong.”

Perhaps Mariah would have gladly stayed at home another time, but the Earl was waiting for her. She couldn’t disappoint him.

“I will go to the ball with you,” she said firmly. “Only give me a minute to get up. Once I’m walking, I’ll feel better.”

Mariah doubted that, but she had to at least try. Not seeing Lord Winchester was not an option.

Chapter 9

The carriage ride to the ball was not an easy one. Mariah's body wanted to curl up and sleep, but she fought to stay awake. She was too close to meeting the Earl once more to give up now. The Baroness and Louisa were observing her as they spoke amongst themselves. They weren't obvious about it, but Mariah knew their behaviour well enough to know what they were doing.

I know that they expect me to sleep. If I did, they would not bother to wake me up but send me home with the carriage.

Why did she have to feel ill today of all days? Mariah had taken an extra measure of her tea, hoping that it would curb her illness, but she felt worse. Perhaps it was no longer as strong as it used to be. If that were true, her mysterious illness was worsening.

"Are you confident you will handle the ball tonight, dear?" the Baroness asked. "You do not look well."

"I'm fine," Mariah insisted, blinking fast.

"Then what is wrong with your eyes?" Louisa asked. "You're blinking an awful lot."

"Uh...a speck of dust went into my eyes," Mariah answered. "I'm fine now."

Mariah pinched the inside of her arm, biting her lower lip at the pain. There would be an angry welt and a bruise by the morning, but at least she felt a little more awake. It wasn't much, but it would get her through the carriage ride until they arrived at the ball. Once there, she expected the music, chatter, and company to keep her awake.

Mariah heard the ball before she saw it. Instant butterflies filled her belly at the thought of seeing the Earl again. Would he let her call him by his first name? If the subject came up, Mariah would undoubtedly allow him the use of her name. It felt impersonal to address each other so formally when they were obviously something more. Mariah didn't know what to call it, but she had felt a connection with the Earl.

He evidently felt the same way, or he would not have written that letter. Why hadn't he signed it? It seemed a tad strange, but Mariah wasn't too concerned by it. Perhaps he was worried someone might come across the letter and embarrass him about it. Mariah thought it was sweet, but someone else might not.

Mariah was last to be helped down the carriage, but she felt a trembling sensation in her legs when she reached the ground.

Oh no, please, no. I need the strength. I simply need a few hours. I do not need to stay until the end, just long enough.

Long enough to spend a little more time with Lord Winchester to see if there indeed was something of value between them. It was too early to tell, but Mariah was willing to spend a little time to find out. However, she did not want to get her hopes up too high. There had to be a balance.

“Are you coming?” the Baroness asked.

Mariah tested her legs, feeling they were stronger. “Yes, I’m coming. I stepped on a stone, and it hurt the arch of my foot.”

Mariah didn’t like lying and hated it, but she couldn’t let the Baroness know what was really going on. The woman would send her straight home. What would the Earl think?

“Be more careful, dear.”

Louisa lifted an eyebrow, looking at the ground. “That’s odd. I stepped where you are now and didn’t feel a thing. Are you certain it was a stone?”

Louisa was calling Mariah out on her lie, but Mariah wasn’t going to back down. She stood up a little straighter, ignoring how tired she felt.

“I do not think we should stand here arguing over what I stood on. Shall we go in?”

Mariah moved forward until she walked past them. However, when she entered the ballroom, her legs began to shake uncontrollably. Mariah reached out to a column, pulling herself until she leaned against it. She couldn’t do this, could she? Mariah knew she had made a terrible mistake ignoring her weakness and pushing herself to come here. What was she going to do?

“What happened, Mariah?” the Baroness asked.

“My legs feel a little odd,” Mariah admitted.

“I did warn you this would happen,” the woman scolded. “Come, I’ll help you to a couch.”

Lady Tottenham placed her arm around Mariah’s waist, gripping a little more tightly than necessary. Mariah winced but distributed her weight onto the Baroness, taking care not to overwhelm her. Louisa was nowhere to be seen. The woman had probably run away when she saw what had happened to Mariah. The young woman often warned Mariah not to embarrass her at events.

Mariah collapsed on a purple couch, grateful to be off her legs.

“You seem to have worsened since we left the house,” the Baroness pointed out.

“Perhaps a little.”

The woman shook her head. “Why did you insist on coming? Why must you be so stubborn, Mariah? I am only trying to help you, but you repeatedly throw that help in my face. What am I to do with you?”

“Please do not worry, my lady.”

“But I do!” the Baroness insisted. “Why did you want to come? You’ve gladly sat out other balls in the past. Why come to this specific one?”

Two bright stains appeared on Mariah’s cheeks. “I wanted to see the Earl again today.”

“Lord Winchester?”

Did the woman not know there was currently no other eligible Earl around? Lord Winchester was the only one here.

“Yes, my lady. I wished to see him again today.”

The Baroness narrowed her eyes but for a moment before she returned to her air of concern and patted Mariah’s hand.

“Endangering yourself for a man is pure foolishness. Perhaps ‘tis your nerves that have weakened you and caused you to tremble.”

Which was better? To accept her presumption or admit to the truth? Either option was embarrassing, but only one would keep her here.

“You may be right, my lady. I do feel rather silly for concerning you over such a trivial matter. Please return to the party. I shall be fine here.”

“What would your poor father say about that?” the Baroness questioned. “I couldn’t possibly leave you alone in this state. Why don’t I get you a glass of wine to calm your nerves?”

Wine tended to make Mariah drowsy. She didn’t think it would do her any good and told the Baroness as much.

“Nonsense, dear,” the woman argued. “Wine is a wonderful calmer of nerves. Just one glass will not hurt you but help you. You would not wish to appear weak and trembling before the Earl, would you?”

Mariah would not want that for all the worlds. “Just a small glass, my lady.”

The woman smiled. “I knew you would see it my way, dear. You must simply sit here, and I shall return soon.”

The Baroness hurried away, her figure cutting a path through the guests. Mariah sat a little higher on the couch, hoping she didn’t look like an invalid. She certainly felt like one. Had the Earl arrived yet? Mariah craned her neck to see, but the crowd was too thick, and she was sitting at an awkward angle.

Lady Tottenham returned with the wine, encouraging Mariah to drink it all up. Fortunately, the Baroness had thoughtfully chosen a smaller wine glass because Mariah was not really fond of it. Hoping the woman would leave once she finished the wine, Mariah gulped it down.

“You appear thirsty, dear,” the Baroness commented. “Why don’t I get you another one?”

Mariah could hardly protest because the woman took off without an answer. Could she drink another one? Perhaps if it was a small glass like the last one.

Four glasses later, Mariah had had enough. “No more, please, my lady. I feel much better,” she lied.

“I’m glad, dear. I truly am. I know sometimes I might appear cruel for keeping you at home, but ‘tis for your own good. However, I’m glad you were able to come out and enjoy the evening with Louisa and me. Why don’t I leave you to rest a little while? You’ll be on your feet in no time at all.”

Mariah didn’t think so. If anything, she felt worse. “Yes, my lady.”

The Baroness patted Mariah’s hand one last time and left. It was just as well because Mariah didn’t think she could pretend to be well anymore.

She lifted her arm to wipe at the perspiration on her upper lip and found it challenging to do so. What was wrong with her arm? It was the same for the other arm as well. Mariah thought to sit up straighter but slumped further into the couch. Dread and fear filled her as she realised that the sickness had worsened.

Mariah was exhausted and didn't think she could leave the couch unassisted. What now? How could she see Lord Winchester in this condition? He had complimented Mariah on her lively chatter and banter and was obviously charmed by her. Mariah couldn't let him see her like this!

"Oh, I have to leave," she cried. "I should never have come."

But how was she going to leave? She could hardly stand, and the Baroness was nowhere to be seen.

Mariah was still thinking of ways to leave the ball without causing a fuss or embarrassment when the guests parted and revealed Lord Winchester.

"Oh no," Mariah muttered.

She was torn between happiness and wanting to run away where the Earl could never find her.

The Earl approached her with a smile. "Miss Nightingale! How pleased I am to see you here. I wasn't sure if you would come."

"Good evening, my lord. I trust you're well."

"Well indeed. May I join you?"

Have him sit next to her? God forbid. Lord Winchester would soon realise that she was unwell. Mariah was loathe to have the man think of her as an invalid rather than the lively woman he had met that fateful night.

“If you do not mind, my lord, I prefer to be alone.”

Surprise registered on his face. “Alone?”

Mariah nodded, feeling terrible. “Yes.”

“But one does not come to a ball to be alone, Miss Nightingale. Are you perhaps feeling unwell this evening? You do appear a tad bit pale.”

Mariah longed to find a mirror to see her face, but not at the risk of falling flat on her face the minute she stood up.

“No,” Mariah snapped. “I’m perfectly fine. I simply do not want any company.”

The Earl pulled his head back. “Oh, I see. I thought… Well, never mind. Perhaps you will save me a dance later?” he asked.

It was the hope in his voice that was nearly Mariah’s undoing. She had been looking forward to seeing him ever since the first ball, but now she was driving him away.

I could not dance with him even if I wanted to.

"I do not wish to dance this evening, my lord. There are plenty of other women who would love to dance with you. I doubt you will be short of partners."

Confusion filled the man's face, but he nodded. "I understand. I hope you enjoy your evening, Miss Nightingale. Please, excuse me."

Mariah watched him walk away, feeling the first pinprick of tears behind her eyes. This was not at all what she had wanted to happen when she saw the Earl. Feeling miserable, she hoped Lucy would come soon. Her friend would know the exact words to say to make Mariah feel a little better about the situation. Perhaps, Lucy could even speak to the Earl on her behalf and explain... what? Mariah didn't want him to know that she was sick.

"Was that the Earl?" Louisa asked, appearing beside the couch.

The woman was the last person Mariah wanted to see. "Yes."

Louisa sat on the edge of the couch, observing her. "He appeared upset. Did you say something to him?"

"Why would you ask that?"

“Simply curious,” the woman said. “I hope to dance with him this evening. I hear he’s a lovely dancer. Did you not partner with him at the last ball?”

What was Louisa up to? The woman wasn’t one to spend time chatting to Mariah unless she had an objective.

“No, I did not say anything to him,” Mariah replied carefully. “And he is a wonderful dancer.”

“Good. Mama said you weren’t feeling well and asked me to see if you were any better. Are you?”

“Yes,” Mariah lied.

She didn’t want Louisa to become angry and assume that Mariah wanted to embarrass her.

Louisa smirked. “I see that. Well, I shall be back in a little while. I need to burn off all this energy I have this evening.”

The comment stung, but Mariah smiled. “Have a lovely time, Louisa, and there’s no need to return. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh no,” the woman protested. “I have every reason to come back and see how you are.”

With that said, Louisa left.

Chapter 10

Mariah seemed to be a different woman this evening. John was tempted to look back to see if it was indeed Mariah he had been talking to, but there was no question about it. Why had she so coldly rejected him?

“You look troubled,” said Hugh, falling into step beside him.

“I’m confused,” John admitted. “Is it possible for a woman to be so different on two separate occasions? As though they were two people?”

“I believe anything is possible when it comes to women.”

“Perhaps,” John said, but he wasn’t convinced.

He sensed something was wrong, but John wasn’t sure what. Mariah had seemed pale and distressed, but she sounded normal, almost cold. Should he go back and ask how she was?

“Do you think this ball is better than mine?” Hugh asked.

“I can’t tell at the moment. It’s still too early.”

“That is not the answer I hoped to hear. Perhaps something will go wrong, such as food poisoning or the wine tasting warm.”

John cast him a side glance. “That’s not a very nice thing to hope. A little competition is good for you. It will help you be better next time.”

Hugh merely shrugged that comment off, grabbing two glasses of champagne as a servant passed them by with a tray.

“Here,” he said, handing one glass to John. “This might put you in better spirits, although I think whiskey would have done better.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” John protested. “I’m merely concerned about something.”

“Or someone?”

“That too,” John agreed. “Has Martin arrived?”

“Judging from the last ball, I do not expect to see him just yet. His lovely sister is not one for punctuality. I do love a little fire in my women.”

“How is tardiness a quality? And since when is she your woman?”

Hugh grinned, slapping John’s arm. “Do you even have to ask? I have

my eyes set on Lucy Dunn."

"Does she know that?" John asked.

"She'll know soon enough. I wish she were here already to dance the first set with me. It seems people are moving to the dance floor."

John had really wanted to dance with Mariah, but she wanted nothing to do with him. It was all so strange. However, John was not a person who gave up easily. What was stopping him from going back and speaking to Mariah again? He might even convince her to dance with him.

"Would you excuse me? I have someone I must speak to."

John made his way back to Mariah, finding her still on the couch. Was she not going to move at all? Mariah appeared to be asleep, but her eyes flew open when he approached her.

"John!" she gasped.

Mariah clearly had not expected to see him again. Her skin still appeared pale, but her eyes were bright.

"I've come to ask for this dance."

“I cannot dance with you, my lord.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Why must you pester me with questions?” she cried. “Simply accept what I have said and ask someone else to dance.”

Why was she acting like this? John was beyond perplexed. “Did I do something wrong? Have I offended you in some way?”

Mariah closed her eyes briefly as though pained. “Why will you not listen? I simply have no desire to dance with you, Lord Winchester. There does not have to be any other reason.”

Something had to be wrong. John was confident he and Mariah had had a lovely time at the Hatcher’s ball. They had parted on good terms. What could have changed in the space of two weeks? He thought to ask, but Louisa came out of nowhere and sat down beside Mariah like some sort of guardian.

“How are you, dear Mariah?” the woman asked with sickly sweetness. “Are you much improved?”

Mariah looked surprised, pulling her head back slightly. “Oh, yes. I’m fine, thank you.”

Louisa looked up, her eyes rounding like she had just noticed he was there. “Oh, my lord! I didn’t see you there. How are you?”

“Well, Miss Cull. How are you?”

“Just splendid.”

“Why don’t you dance with Louisa, Lord Winchester?” Mariah suggested. “I know that you’re looking for a partner, and Louisa is a wonderful dancer.”

John’s jaw dropped. Who said he wished to dance with Louisa? Mariah couldn’t just hand another woman over to him when John wanted to dance with her instead.

“Oh, I would love to!” Louisa exclaimed.

John inwardly groaned. He didn’t have much choice now, did he? If he refused, it might cause murmurs and bruised pride. He held his hand out.

“It would be my pleasure to dance with you, Miss Cull.”

Louisa jumped up, grabbing his hand. “Shall we?”

For a woman who was so concerned about her stepsister, she didn’t appear bothered now. John looked back and found Mariah watching him with pained eyes. What was going on?

Mariah knew that staying away from John was for the best, but it didn't feel good. She watched him dance with woman after woman, wishing she was the one with him instead. She recalled how wonderful it had felt to dance with him, to feel like she was floating. Now, those other women got to experience that pleasure. However, it was better to be remembered as a cold woman than one who was ill.

Two Weeks Later

John had never been so annoyed over a woman before. Each day was just a new day to feel irritated and inwardly complain about how fickle women were. Frankly, he was tired of it.

"Your temper is still not improved, I see," Hugh commented.

"And you're not helping. When did you get back? I thought you were with your father to look over some horses."

Hugh had left with his father early that morning to purchase a few Thoroughbreds. It had given John some time away from the man and his obsession with wanting to be known. There was only so much one could take of Hugh Hatcher. The man was a good man, but he lacked sensitivity and sense at times.

“I was, but it turned out to be a waste of time. The seller couldn’t verify that the horses were indeed Thoroughbreds, and Father told him he couldn’t buy them without the official stamp of approval. A bit of an argument ensued before I convinced my father to leave. He hates it when someone wastes his time.”

“I can understand that.”

“Why don’t we go to the Pump Room today,” Hugh suggested. “I think I need some of its restorative powers.”

“Do you think they work?”

“Everyone else seems to think so. They say the natural mineral waters have health benefits.”

John snorted. “If that were the case, then we wouldn’t have people dying from lifestyle diseases. I would rather visit Martin and play cards. No wagers,” he added.

Hugh laughed. “Are you worried I’ll clean you out?”

“No, I just don’t trust a man who loses in order to trick someone. It makes them untrustworthy.”

“Are you saying I’m untrustworthy?” Hugh asked, insulted.

“You lied at cards to trick me into coming here. Wouldn’t you be wary if you were in my shoes?”

“I apologised, didn’t I?”

“And I forgave you,” said John. “But that does not mean I trust you. Cheer up, Hugh. I’m still your friend, aren’t I? Let’s go to Martin’s and play some cards. I need something to keep me occupied.”

The man agreed begrudgingly, but as soon as they reached the Dunn’s home, Hugh acted as though he had been the one to suggest the visit. John let it be.

“Is your sister here?” Hugh asked hopefully.

“No,” Martin replied suspiciously. “She is off shopping with my mother. Why do you ask?”

Martin had warned Hugh to not try anything with Lucy, but John doubted the man would listen.

“Just curious. Shall we play?”

Martin pulled out a table and arranged the cards. Ten minutes in, it

was clear to everyone that John's head wasn't in the game.

"What is wrong?" Martin asked. "Your mind is elsewhere."

"Probably thinking about Miss Nightingale," Hugh answered. "She rejected him at the last ball."

"Don't take it personally," Martin advised. "You're not the only one she has turned down."

That didn't make John feel any better. Since then, he had seen Mariah at other events, and she had appeared just as cold and dull as she had at the ball. It was mind-boggling.

"I understand that, but it's not normal to be this different from moment to moment. Mariah was so lively when I first met her. She was the one to introduce me to people and tell me about this town. Now, she will hardly speak to me."

Mariah didn't speak to anyone at events. Those who ventured to converse with her were soon turned away with a cold apology. John had continued to watch her as he tried to understand her changed behaviour. Most of the time, Mariah occupied whatever couch was available and sat alone for most of the night unless Lucy was with her.

Lucy evidently understood her friend because John had noticed more comfortable silences between the women than animated chatter. Once or twice, the Baroness would approach Mariah and always came away smiling.

“That is Mariah’s way,” Martin insisted. “Do you recall the illness I spoke about? It comes and goes, but perhaps this time, it has been more prolonged than usual. Lucy worries so much about her.”

John didn’t blame her. He had only met Mariah about a month ago, and yet he was feeling anxious about her.

“It must be challenging,” said Hugh. “I cannot stand even a day of sickness. Why does Miss Nightingale go to gatherings when she is so ill?”

“Boredom?” Martin suggested. “I would not wish to remain in the house indefinitely. A person needs a social life, no matter how small or insignificant.”

John couldn’t imagine being confined to the four walls of his home. He would probably grow a little insane.

“You say that her illness came about after her father died?” he questioned.

“Yes,” said Martin, nodding. “It was quite sudden. I recall being in her presence when it happened the first time. One minute she had been talking and laughing with Lucy, and the next, she had fainted dead away. We were all alarmed. It must have been a few days after the funeral.”

John understood distress and pain at the loss of a loved one, but

physical illness? Could Mariah's mind have affected her physically?

"But why didn't she get better?" he argued. "Why does she remain ill?"

Martin shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps the stress was just too much for her. Mariah was close to her father, after all. It might have been too much to deal with her mother passing on and then her father. She's essentially an orphan."

"And the Baroness?" John asked. "Did she not do anything to comfort Miss Nightingale?"

Martin snorted. "I doubt the woman ever cared about Mariah. Lucy despises her and her daughter. She claims they torture Mariah."

John's eyes widened. "Torture?"

"Not physically, or anything like that," Martin quickly said. "They wouldn't dare do that with so many people around who love Mariah. No, Lucy believes they mentally and emotionally torture her, and the poor woman can't see it. She's too good-natured to do so."

John was beginning to dislike the Baroness and her daughter more and more. Mariah's illness seemed odd, and no one could explain it well enough to satisfy John. He needed to find out what had brought about such a drastic change to Mariah's health because nothing made sense. A woman couldn't be well one day and suddenly grow ill another. She just couldn't.

Chapter 11

A dinner party was the last thing John wished to attend that evening. Buttoning the flap of his silk breeches, he thought of ways to get out of tonight's event. His mood had not largely improved despite Hugh and Martin keeping him occupied with promenades through the town, a game of cards, or horseback riding. The matter concerning Mariah's illness and subsequent treatment of him had left John with a rather confusing opinion of the woman.

"Milton," he said, calling the attention of the manservant attending to him.

The man was so focused on helping John put on his coat that he did not appear to hear at first.

"Milton," John repeated.

The man looked up, his thin white hair momentarily tickling John's chin. "My, lord?"

"Take a step back that I may speak to you. 'Tis unsettling to speak to a man whose face is mere inches from mine."

Milton immediately bowed his head and stepped away, his crooked gait pronounced in the most minor of movements.

“Is this better, my lord?”

“Yes, thank you. Have you known many ill people? I don’t suppose you have, as it is my experience that servants are the hardiest people to be found, yet illness and death touch everyone. Well, have you?”

“I have been ill once before, my lord,” the servant answered. “My father and mother were ill before they passed on. My brother, too. Then there was my first aunt on my mother’s side, a young cousin I barely knew, three servants in the master’s employ, my neighbour in–”

“That’s more than enough, Milton,” said John. “Forgive my earlier assumption.”

“No apology needed, my lord.”

“Since you’re rather acquainted with illness, do you think it normal for a young woman to suddenly fall ill due to heartache and remain so? Only, the illness is not constant, but comes and goes with varying strength.”

Milton frowned. “I’m no physician, my lord, but I know heartache can cause death. I once knew a woman whose husband never returned after a sea voyage. The news caused a decline in health until her eventual death.”

“But that is precisely my point, Milton. The poor woman declined in health, but Mariah’s illness came about suddenly. Now, she is not ill every day. Sometimes she is well and lively and a pleasure to be around.”

Milton nodded in understanding. “You speak of Miss Nightingale, my lord. That is a sad story if I ever heard one. I knew of her parents because my sister, God rest her soul, was their housekeeper for many years. Miss Nightingale looks much like her mother but has the mind of her father.”

John had a feeling that everyone in Cheltenham, servant or not, knew Mariah.

“What happened to her mother?”

“She died in childbirth, my lord. Lady Tottenham was to have a boy, but he was lost as well. It was a hard time for Lord Tottenham, losing a wife and son, but he pulled himself together for Miss Nightingale’s sake. She was just a child herself at the time, you see. A beautiful child with much life in her. I believe it was her lovely nature that brought healing to her father’s heart.”

It seemed that Mariah’s life was full of tragedy. If the loss of her mother had not altered her disposition and health–and a young woman is most tied to her mother–why would she grow ill after her father’s death? Surely, she would have improved in months to come?

“The Baron remarried a widow,” Milton continued. “It was no doubt to give young Miss Nightingale a mother.”

John could hear the note of disapproval in the manservant’s voice. Did he not like the current Baroness? It would be forward of John to ask him, as no servant would wilfully speak against a member of the

upper class, but John was tempted.

"And a sister," John eventually added.

Milton hesitated and eventually nodded. "Yes, Miss Cull. May I complete dressing you, my lord? Young Mr Hatcher will want to know why I have taken so long to ready you."

The manservant said nothing more as he buttoned up John's coat, and John asked no more questions. He had learnt a lot from Milton, most of it gleaned from reading between the lines.

Hugh stuck his head around his door, looking him up and down. "What the devil is taking you so long? The carriage is due to leave at any second."

John pulled his face. "I think I might have a headache. You should go without me."

"Still moping, I see," said Hugh. "Well, put that sour face away and get downstairs. Martin will be offended if you refuse to attend his dinner party."

"Then express my sincerest apologies and inform him of my headache," John insisted.

Hugh barked out laughter. "I shall do no such thing! A headache, indeed. This has to do with your failed flirtation, doesn't it? I cannot

begin to comprehend your insistence on pining after Mariah. She is not the only woman in Cheltenham, for heaven's sake."

"Oh, just hold your tongue and let me be. I'll be out in a minute."

"Make sure you do come out," said Hugh and closed the door behind him.

"It'll be a grand dinner party," Milton commented, helping John into his shoes. "A young man such as yourself should relish whatever good fun should come your way."

John nodded, thanked the manservant for his assistance and left the room with much reluctance. He would do what he could to be a good sport for Martin's sake, but he made no promises. In truth, John would rather return to London and forget about Cheltenham, but he was forced to spend the whole summer with the Hatchers.

I sound like a pitiful fool. I shouldn't base all of my experiences of Cheltenham on my one disappointment. Martin deserves a willing guest.

John resolved to make the most of the evening and put thoughts of Mariah Nightingale at the back of his mind.

Better said than done.

All John's resolve flew out of the window when he stepped inside the Hatcher's drawing room and saw Mariah's small form perched on a settee. Lucy sat beside her, and to his displeasure, Louisa and the Baroness were not too far off.

"Do not lose your composure," Hugh whispered in his ear.

John shrugged the man off. "I'm no fool. Where is Martin?"

"Several paces to Mariah's right. You failed to see him when your eyes locked on her face."

"I do not know what you mean," John murmured.

"I see," said Hugh with a knowing look. "Will we stand here and talk about how you have not melted at the sight of Mariah, or go over there and mingle with the guests?"

John ignored him and moved forward, politely nodding at guests along the way. Hugh followed, chuckling low as he drew up to John.

"Prickly, aren't you?" the man said. "Let's hope your mood does not worsen after speaking to the lovely Mariah."

"Stop speaking nonsense," John warned. "I don't want anyone to hear such foolish claims."

Hugh snorted, quickly showing a gesture of locking his lips when John shot him a hard stare.

Martin chose then to look their way, his face lighting up with mischief. His eyes darted towards Mariah and back to John before wriggling his eyebrows.

“Will you scold Martin as well?” Hugh asked.

John sighed. “Let it be.”

They drew up to Martin, exchanging greetings and pleasantries with everyone around. Mariah did not meet his eyes, fuelling John’s frustrations. He longed to tell her to look at him but doing so would bring unnecessary attention. Soon, everyone was called into dinner, and before he could say a word, Louisa and her mother flanked him on either side.

“We must have you sit near us, my lord,” said the Baroness.

John inwardly groaned but smiled outwardly. “Of course, Lady Tottenham.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” the woman tsked. “Charlotte, my dear Earl.”

“My apologies, Charlotte.”

The Baroness grinned, showing slightly yellowed, dainty teeth. “Much better. I was just saying to Louisa that we must have you over for dinner.”

“Yes, my lord,” Louisa agreed. “It would please us immensely.”

This sort of chatter continued throughout dinner, eating up John’s attention and patience. Mariah was not seated too far from him, but he could do no more than glance at her every now and then. John hoped his fortune would change once dinner was concluded, and everyone returned to the drawing-room, but it wasn’t to be so. Mariah appeared intent on keeping away from him, taking a seat far from him with the ever-faithful Lucy by her side.

“This party is rather dull,” said Hugh. “No offence to you, Martin.”

“‘Tis my party, thus I should take every offence,” Martin replied. “I’ll have my sister play on the pianoforte. Excuse me.”

Martin caught his sister’s attention, pointing at the pianoforte. Lucy first shook her head, but Mariah laid a hand on the woman’s lap, speaking into her ear. John watched Lucy sigh and nod before getting up and heading to the instrument. She struck up a cheerful tune, calling for guests to dance.

Here’s my chance to speak with Mariah. She cannot make an excuse as she is quite alone.

“Lucy plays well, my lord,” said Louisa at his elbow.

Thwarted again. John turned to the woman, wishing she would go away. “Yes, she does indeed, Miss Cull.”

“Goodness! You must call me Louisa, my lord. There is no need for such formalities between us.”

There was a need for every kind of formality! That alone would keep the young woman from crossing boundaries. John had a feeling the woman was the sort to go to great lengths to achieve her ends.

“Have you lived in Cheltenham long, Louisa?” he asked.

“Ever since Mama married the Baron. I think it has been six years or so.”

“Are you close to your sister? I imagine you would be after six years.”

John observed Louisa carefully, wishing to see her reaction. The woman’s eyes flashed with what appeared to be irritation before hiding it behind a fake smile.

“As close as sisters can be. Poor Mariah has been so sick, though. Frail and weak, and quite a bore. Why don’t you ask her to dance, my lord? I’m sure you will bring some cheer into her life. She certainly needs it.

Mama and I do what we can, but perhaps a handsome gentleman will bring back some of her liveliness."

John was surprised at the woman's request. "If you insist," he said, needing no further encouragement. "I'll ask her now."

John went straight to Mariah, neither veering to the left or right but keeping his eyes on her dark head. Mariah never lifted her head, not even when he stood before her. The rigidity of her body gave John evidence that she was aware of his nearness.

"Miss Nightingale," he said.

Mariah hesitated for just a moment, slowly raising her head. "Good evening, my lord."

"It is a good evening and will be even better if you agree to dance with me. Be warned that I will not hear of a refusal."

Mariah's cheeks bloomed with pretty colour, her ringlets shaking as she dipped her head.

"You pay me a great honour, my lord."

"Then say you will dance with me."

To his amazement and pleasure, Mariah nodded. “I will, my lord.”

John could hardly contain his excitement as he held out his hand, waiting with bated breath as Mariah’s pale, trembling hand slowly lowered into his own. She stood up, but something appeared to go wrong because Mariah paled, uttering a broken cry as her hands slipped out of his and her body crumpled back on the couch.

“Mariah!” John cried.

Mariah appeared so still that John thought she had fainted, but her eyelashes fluttered briefly before opening slowly. John was pushed out of the way when the Baroness and Louisa came rushing over, faffing over Mariah.

“Mariah!” the Baroness cried. “What has happened, dear? Oh, excuse us, my lord,” she said to him. “I must take Mariah elsewhere. I warned her that too much excitement might be bad for her.”

“What can be done for her?” John demanded, helplessly standing by.

“Do not fret, my lord,” Lady Tottenham insisted. “I will take her away. Please, do not let this ruin your night.”

Ruin his night? Why should he be concerned about the evening when Mariah lay before him so motionless but for the movement of her head? John struggled not to rush forward and see to her himself, but that would attract unwanted attention. After all, he had no right to touch her so familiarly. Still, he couldn’t stand by and do nothing.

“Allow me to help you,” said John.

“You can help us by drawing attention away, my lord,” said Louisa. “Poor Mariah would not like to know that she has interrupted the evening.”

John’s brow puckered. “That should be the least of her worries. Her health should come first.”

“Oh, but you do not know Mariah as I do, my lord,” Louisa argued. “She will feel terrible about this scene.”

“Louisa speaks the truth,” said the Baroness. “The guests must be distracted. Why not dance with my daughter? That should encourage the others to turn away and continue with the party. Say you will do it for Mariah’s sake?”

John looked down at Mariah. A little colour had returned to her face, but she remained pale and weak.

“She will be well?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Baroness assured. “Please look upon us with favour and help Louisa take the attention away from Mariah as I move her to another room. She needs rest.”

“If you are certain that it will assist you, then I shall be pleased to dance with Louisa,” John vowed.

What seemed like a look of triumph flashed in the Baroness’ eyes, quickly hidden by concern and gratitude.

John led Louisa away, unable to resist looking back. Lady Tottenham had managed to help Mariah to her feet, allowing the young woman to lean heavily on her as they left the room.

“Mariah will be fine, my lord,” said Louisa. “Come, let us dance.”

John did his best to appear unconcerned as he danced, but his thoughts remained with Mariah. Could nothing be done for her? John felt desperation within him to find a cure, a treatment, but he was no physician. What could he possibly do to help her?

Chapter 12

A single butterfly alighted on a stalk of lavender, flapping its delicate wings once before taking off.

“Is there not enough pollen on that one?” Mariah asked it, tracking its movements. “How I wish I was as light of foot as you are.”

Then she would not have made a fool of herself the night before. Placing cold palms on her inflamed cheeks, Mariah closed her eyes tight. The wretched scene at the Dunn’s dinner party played clearly in her mind, taunting her.

“Miss Nightingale?” called Tessa.

Mariah slowly opened her eyes. “Yes?”

“I have come to see how you fare. Is the sun not too scorching?”

Mariah lifted her face to the sun, appreciating its warmth. “The sun is a blessing, Tessa.”

“And a curse. Take care not to remain too long outside, Miss. It will reach its full strength soon.”

Mariah had come into the gardens at first light, unable to remain in bed. She had tossed and turned, reliving her night over and over again. Her constant nightmare would have been better relief than the memory of her shame.

Why did I agree to dance with him? Why?

Mariah touched a finger to her brow, rubbing it as though it could erase all of her plaguing thoughts.

“Miss?”

“Let me enjoy what time I have left, Tessa. I’ll return to the house before the sun is high in the sky.”

“Yes, Miss,” said Tessa. “Shall I bring you something to drink or eat?”

“No, thank you, Tessa. You may leave.”

Tessa curtsied. “Yes, Miss.”

Mariah waited for the maid to leave before allowing tears to slip down her face. What a fool she had been! What had she been thinking by agreeing to the Earl’s request?

Mariah had woken up that morning feeling well, giving her hope for

the night ahead. Lucy had expressed her wish to see her there, and Mariah had been glad to fulfil it. Little did she know that her strength would wane, and her body would fight against her will.

“Despite my illness, I chose to accept the invitation to dance,” she scolded herself. “To what end?”

Mariah touched her dress pocket, feeling the letter that had set off the events of the previous night. It had come two days ago and looked much as the first one had with a flower pressed into its seal. Mariah thought to take it out and reread it, but the sound of approaching feet stopped her.

“Mariah!” exclaimed Louisa, appearing before her. “Should you be out here after suffering such a humiliating night? You must still be weak.”

Mariah’s cheeks burned with shame. “I needed to clear my thoughts.”

“I do not blame you. I would want to run away and never return after what happened last night.”

Mariah would if she had somewhere to go or if her health could handle the journey. She had been thinking about leaving and possibly becoming a governess, but who would recommend her? Mariah had never formally taught anyone, but she did love to share knowledge.

Before her mystery illness struck, Mariah had often read stories to the servants’ children and taught the older ones their letters. Her deteriorating health kept her away from almost everyone now, but even if she had been well, Mariah would not have been able to resume

teaching because the Baroness had forbidden children in the main house.

“Why do you always do that?” Louisa asked.

“Do what?”

“Take on that faraway look in your eyes as though you’re better than everyone.”

Mariah pulled her head back slightly. “Better than everyone? What do you mean, Louisa?”

Louisa gave a scornful laugh. “Do not pretend that you do not know. You’re the daughter of a baron, and I am not. You believed I was beneath you from the very moment Mama and I came into this house.”

Surprise did not fit the emotion Mariah was feeling. “If I have hurt you in any way, please forgive me.”

“Ever the gracious one,” Louisa mocked. “I do not believe your sincerity one bit. Perhaps others may have fallen for your charms and sweet manners, but not me. Maybe this illness is a result of your true evil nature and the misery you have caused others.”

Mariah jaw dropped. Is that what Louisa honestly thought? Mariah searched her memories for a time she might have acted unfairly

towards Louisa, but none came to mind. Why would Louisa accuse her of such cruelty and attribute this terrible illness to non-existent behaviour? It made no sense.

"Are you saying that I deserve this illness?"

Louisa shrugged one shoulder. "I only said perhaps. You should truthfully search your heart and see all the wickedness that lies within. I have tried to be a sister to you, but you think me beneath you. Who but Mama and I could take care of you as we have? We have sacrificed much to keep you healthy, and yet your illness continues to curse us all. Sometimes I wonder if you are sick at all or if 'tis all in your head. Yes, that's it. Your snobbery has gone to your head!"

Louisa turned away then, her rose perfume trailing behind her as she entered the house. Mariah knew it was French because she had once owned the same perfume before the Baroness thought it was an unnecessary luxury for a sick woman. Many of Mariah's items had been deemed a luxury, including some of her mother's jewellery. Mariah had managed to hide away those with the greatest sentimental value to her, but the Baroness had taken the rest and wore them frequently.

Mariah stood motionless for some time, merely staring at nothing until she felt a trembling come over her body. It was not of her sickness but shock. Stumbling to a garden bench, she sat down heavily.

Louisa's accusations were a noose about her neck, choking the words Mariah wanted to speak in her defence. But did she have the right to defend herself? Mariah had to wonder if she had been blind to her own behaviour and if Louisa's words had any truth in them.

“Why else would she speak to them?” Mariah asked aloud. “Why would she throw such accusations at me if she did not believe them?”

Perhaps that had been the reason for their lack of sisterly affection. Mariah had often tried to build a relationship with Louisa, but the woman had always rejected her. Had Mariah tried hard enough? She no longer knew. It pained her to think anyone could have suffered because of her actions, even if unknowingly performed.

Mariah rubbed her temples, trying to relieve the tension she felt. A little lavender oil would do a world of good in alleviating her symptoms, but Mariah did not wish to return to the house just yet. She decided to crush fresh lavender flowers between her hands and use the warmth of her palms to release the oils.

Pushing to her feet, Mariah heard the crinkle of paper and remembered the letter. She promptly forgotten about the lavender as she immediately took out the letter and reread its contents, sinking back onto the bench.

Dearest Mariah,

I hope this letter finds you well.

No words can truly describe my disappointment and sadness that you perhaps unknowingly caused. I do not know if I have angered you in any way. If I have, I beg you to tell me the fault I have committed against you that I may rectify it.

Our last meeting had been filled with hope to see you once more and dance with you, but those hopes were dashed when you refused my request. Why? Have I become so repulsive to you in such a short time?

I ask you to put me out of my misery and name my wrongs.

Just like the last letter, it was not signed, but it was dated the day before the Dunn's dinner party. John had been the only person she had rejected; thus, she knew it had to be from him. There was no other explanation.

No longer able to sit idly by, Mariah left her seat to walk amongst the flowers once again. She trailed her hand over each bloom within reach, wishing life was as simple as a flower.

"I do a lot of wishing," she said sadly.

Mariah did not know of anyone else who wanted another life so much that being a creature or flower was better than the life she lived. It was pitiful, really, but she could not help it. Even the flowers looked more robust than she was!

"I feel that the slightest of winds could blow me over," she thought aloud. "Yet these plants remain firmly rooted in the soil. I think 'tis natural to look for greener grass elsewhere when your own leaves much to be desired."

Mariah had heard several people remark on how dull and lifeless she had appeared while at the Dunn's party. Whether they meant for Mariah to hear them was debatable. Did the guests hold Louisa's

opinion of her?

Did they also believe Mariah's illness was a result of her cruel behaviour? Mariah could hardly believe it because she had always taken great care in treating people well. It was the one aspect of her life that she was confident of.

"There must be a misunderstanding between Louisa and me," Mariah decided. "I will do whatever I can to mend our fences and perhaps finally become sisters."

It was something to look forward to. Mariah only hoped Louisa would be willing to set aside her grudge and find some common ground between them. But that was the least of her worries right now. Mariah needed to address the embarrassing event of the night before.

She looked at the letter, going through each sentence with aching slowness. John had been hurt by her rejection; that much was abundantly clear. Was it any wonder that Mariah had been so desperate to avoid hurting him once again? It was not John's fault that she was ill, neither was it his fault that she had been borderline rude to him.

At least Mariah believed it was marginal, but perhaps John had seen it differently. Self-preservation had been Mariah's primary goal that night, which included refusing all dance invitations, and not hurting anyone's feelings.

"I thought perhaps his pride would have been temporarily dented," she thought aloud. "Never could I have imagined that I hurt him!"

Mariah thought about what Louisa had said, comparing the woman's words with the letter's contents. John and Louisa had both accused her of causing misery to them, albeit under different circumstances.

"But it all amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?" Mariah said miserably.

Mariah had hoped to have good memories of her brief time with the Earl to keep within her bosom for challenging times, but all she could recall now was his shocked face as she had collapsed.

The back door suddenly opened, and Tessa came running out, her hair coming out of her pins.

"Miss! Miss!"

Tessa almost barrelled into Mariah but managed to stop herself in time, bending over to catch her breath.

"Goodness, Tessa! What on earth has happened? Why are you running?"

"Miss," the maid panted. "A gentleman has come to call on you."

Mariah's eyes widened. "Me? Whatever for? Who is he?"

“I’m sorry, Miss, I hardly caught what he was saying ‘cause he took me by surprise,” said Tessa, her cheeks reddening. “I was out front speaking to the gardener’s nephew when the gentleman approached with his gig. He told me to tell you he has come to speak to you. I’m quite sure I heard him say ‘earl’, but I cannot be certain.”

John! Who else could it be? Mariah put a hand to her chest, feeling her rapidly beating heart. What could he want? She wasn’t prepared to see him at all.

“Very well, Tessa. Please tell him I’ll be with him in just a moment.”

Mariah needed to neaten her hair and perhaps change her dress. She couldn’t meet the Earl like this! But no sooner had Tessa turned to the door that John came striding through, his gaze locked on her. Mariah sucked in her breath, feeling her feet fasten to the ground. Thoughts of fleeing entered her mind, but she knew she would not be able to run away. All she could do was stand there and wait to hear what John had come to say.

He cuts such an imposing figure walking towards me like that. Is he angry?

“Shall I leave, Miss?” Tessa asked.

Mariah had forgotten the woman was still there. “Yes,” she replied, her lips trembling. “You may go.”

The maid first looked warily between Mariah and John, hesitating for just a moment before curtsying before the Earl and hurrying away.

Mariah wondered if the Baroness was aware of John's visit and decided that she couldn't know. If the woman did, she would have been here in a flash.

John's shoulders appeared to relax when Tessa closed the door behind her, his expression softening.

"My apologies for coming upon you so suddenly, Miss Nightingale," he said.

Mariah swallowed a tad hard. "There are no apologies necessary, my lord. How are you this morning?"

"You ask me when it is I who should be asking you?" he exclaimed. "You gave me quite a scare last night."

John glanced at her hand briefly, and belatedly realising that she still held his letter in her hand, Mariah quickly stuffed it into her pocket. It would be odd for the author to see her holding the letter.

"I am sorry, my lord, but I am quite well, I assure you," said Mariah, her cheeks growing warm.

"I am happy to hear that, but I cannot help but retain my alarm. I had never felt so helpless as I did when you crumpled before me. I was sure you had fainted."

Why did the Earl have to verbally relive such a terrible and shameful

moment? Mariah's cheeks blazed with colour as she stammered her response.

"But they are n-not unusual, my lord," she assured him. "I often h-have them. Fainting spells, I mean."

"That cannot be normal. Can nothing be done to help you?"

Mariah expected to hear John complain, but he seemed genuinely concerned about her. She was kept from saying any further by the appearance of the Baroness and Louisa. They did not look pleased.

Oh, dear.

Chapter 13

John noticed the change in Mariah's expression and thought to ask about it when he heard Lady Tottenham's voice.

"Lord Winchester!" the woman exclaimed. "Oh, Lord Winchester!"

John rolled his eyes. The Baroness had terrible timing, but it was undoubtedly her plan. It was only a matter of time before the woman discovered his presence and interrupted him.

He turned to the women, forcing a smile but found his courage flag when he witnessed the predatory expressions on their faces.

Good gracious! I might as well be surrounded by a pack of wolves.

"Good morning, ladies. I hope this day finds you well?"

"Very well, my lord," Louisa replied. "Mama and I were not aware that you were coming today."

"Yes," the Baroness agreed. "It's a pleasant surprise, nonetheless. Have you come to spend the day with us? Louisa briefly mentioned that she had asked you to dinner."

Had she? John couldn't remember. "I have come to inquire after Miss Nightingale's health. I was quite worried about her."

"Oh, you needn't fret about that," Louisa cried. "Mama and I take great care of Mariah. Is that not so, Mariah?"

The women looked expectantly behind John, their mouths smiling but their eyes full of warning. Did they think he could not decipher their looks? If they were indeed so mindful of Mariah, what need was there to threaten her?

Mariah averted her eyes, smiling faintly. "Oh yes. I am very well taken care of, my lord. I want for nothing."

"Do you see, my lord?" said Louisa. "Mariah is well."

"I'm sure Lord Winchester can see that for himself," said her mother. "'Tis obvious, is it not? Perhaps you should go inside and rest, Mariah. We do not want you to wear yourself out, dear."

"Yes, my lady," Mariah replied.

John was not at all pleased that the women intended to push Mariah indoors before he had had his fill of her. He still had much to ask and talk about.

"I ask that you allow Mariah to remain outside a while longer," he asked graciously. "I have come to call upon her, after all."

Surprise registered on the Baroness' face. She likely had not expected him to say anything but his agreement.

"Oh, well, um…Why don't you come in for refreshment, my lord?" the Baroness suggested. "Mariah may join us if she feels well enough, but I would prefer her to rest. I'm confident Mariah agrees with me."

The last of Lady Tottenham's sentence was said staring at Mariah. This time, her eyes were carefully made to convey concern and nothing else.

"Oh, yes, my lady," Mariah readily agreed. "In fact, I think I should go now and lie down."

That was not what John wished her to do. "On the contrary, Charlotte, I wish to take a little walk with Mariah. She appears well enough for that, don't you think? I would be much obliged if you would bring refreshments to us."

The Baroness could not deny such a kindly spoken request without question. She would have to allow the walk or be seen as an ungracious lady of the house.

"Of course, my lord, but I'm afraid you must be chaperoned. You understand that I cannot allow you to walk alone, so I propose that–"

John, knowing that the woman would volunteer her daughter as a

chaperone, put in his own nomination.

“The young maid who announced my presence will serve as a chaperone,” he interrupted. “Would you mind calling her? What is her name, Miss Nightingale?” he asked her.

“Tessa,” Mariah replied quietly.

“Thank you,” he said. “Would you mind calling Tessa, Louisa? I would forever be in your debt.”

The young woman appeared reluctant but nodded tightly. “Of course. One moment, please.”

“I think I’ll go in as well, my lord,” the Baroness added.

The woman looked at him as though she hoped he would change his mind and agree to a morning’s refreshment with them, but John had no intention of doing so.

“You should not have done that,” Mariah protested as soon as the Baroness had disappeared inside.

“Done what?”

“Refused their invitation on my account.”

Mariah was quite distressed, alarming him. “Have I caused you trouble?”

Mariah looked away. “That is not what I said. I merely meant that you should have accepted the refreshments inside the house.”

“Having it outside is just as good as having it inside,” John argued. “We’ll wait for the servant to maintain all propriety, but I intend to walk with you, Miss Nightingale.”

Mariah said nothing, somewhat dampening John’s mood. Had he done wrong by coming to see her? John did not believe so, but Mariah was not pleased at the given moment.

The maid appeared some minutes later, longer than John would have expected. He immediately attributed the delay to the Baroness and her daughter and their displeasure of his preference for Mariah over their company. John hoped they would not exercise their ire upon Mariah, but he likely hoped in vain.

“Shall we, Miss Nightingale?” said John, holding out his arm.

Mariah took it, laying her pale hand upon his coat sleeve. John led the way despite not being familiar with his surroundings, but since he knew Mariah would not initiate the walk, he felt inclined to do so.

Silence enveloped them as they walked the length of the garden twice,

both saying nothing. John did not know how to breach the silence and assumed Mariah felt the same. The poor maid was undoubtedly uncomfortable, but duty forced her presence.

At last, Mariah spoke. “I am terribly sorry for insulting you with my cold manner, my lord. I did not wish for you to see my illness take effect on my person and thought to save you the trouble. Alas, I was not able to do so last night.”

Alarmed, John stopped their walk. “There is no need to apologise! The thought! Do you think me such a brute that I would complain about something that you cannot control?”

Mariah said nothing, but her eyes showed suspicion. She doubted him? John couldn’t begin to understand why.

“I speak the truth. I came here today to inquire about your health and to pledge my help.”

“Pledge your help, my lord?” Mariah asked. “But that is not necessary.”

“Do not take the wind out of my sails. Pray, tell me, what symptoms precede or follow your illness? If we could identify these things, I am certain we could create a plan of care for you. I have heard of people changing their diet, taking in moderate exercise, even bloodletting, although I am not so keen on that. If one is weak, why remove one’s lifeblood? ‘Tis a strange practice.”

Mariah tilted her head. “You truly mean to help me?”

“Indeed, I do,” John assured.

“The tea has arrived, my lord,” said the maid.

“Thank you, Tessa,” Mariah answered. “Let us return to the garden table, my lord.”

Tea was promptly prepared and given out, but John could not help but remark on the strange odour of Mariah’s tea. He had first noted the separate teapots used, then the brew’s colour that poured out of the spout. Perhaps he may have ignored these differences if not for the smell. Mariah coloured at the comment, holding the teacup closer to her chest as though to hide it. Unfortunately, a light breeze blew John’s way and brought the strong scent of the vile tea to him.

“I drink this regularly to counter my illness, my lord,” she answered. “It fortifies me and gives me a lovely peace whenever I drink it. Its smell leaves a lot to be desired, I admit, but I am quite used to it.”

“Well, if it helps,” John said uncertainly.

Mariah stiffened suddenly, her eyes darting somewhere above him. John observed her straighten her back, losing the little freedom of speech she had enjoyed but moments before.

“What is it?” John asked.

“Lady Tottenham is watching us from the upstairs parlour window,” she said in hushed tones.

John thought to look if not for Mariah’s quick ‘oh, do not do that!’ He immediately paused, busying himself with his seat instead.

“Are you so afraid of her?” he asked. “We are only having tea.”

Mariah lowered her head. “I am not afraid, my lord. I merely do not wish to cause her undue stress.”

“Sitting and having tea would bring the Baroness stress?” John questioned, confused.

“Oh, that is not what I meant,” Mariah cried. “Pray, do not ask me such questions, my lord.”

John inwardly scolded himself for distressing her and was annoyed by the Baroness’ weight on the matter. The woman was not bodily present, but the mere sight of her was enough to change Mariah’s composure.

“Why not entertain your dear stepmother?” he suggested.

“Whatever do you mean?”

John stood up, giving his arm once more. “We shall walk and enjoy ourselves, Miss Nightingale, or may I call you Mariah? I believe we know each other well enough to be less formal. It would be my pleasure to hear you call me John.”

Mariah raised her eyebrows but rose to her feet. “I fear you have some mischief underway, but I find myself doing as you asked. We have not touched our tea yet,” she complained, looking at their full cups.

“I can think of worse things than cold tea, one being the attentions of your stepsister.”

“My lord!” she exclaimed, correcting herself when he lifted an eyebrow. “I mean, John!”

John laughed. “You said that with equal feeling. You are not a stage performer, are you?”

“Goodness, no!” Mariah objected, soon narrowing her eyes as his twinkled with mirth. “Ah, you said that in jest.”

“Take my arm, Mariah. I am only getting started.”

John made the most of his time with Mariah, talking and laughing while they walked around the garden. He did not look towards the house once but sensed a pair of eyes watching them. He wasn’t bothered in the least.

Charlotte watched in much agitation as the Earl and Mariah walked about the garden as lovers would.

“They must have walked a hundred laps by now!” she complained.

“A hundred?” Louisa asked in doubt. “Nay, I do not think so.”

Well, it certainly felt like it! Charlotte could hear their laughter despite the distance, adding to the anger simmering below her seemingly calm façade. What did Mariah mean by spending time with the Earl? This had not been the plan at all.

“Nothing can be that amusing,” she muttered.

“I beg your pardon, Mama?”

Charlotte glanced behind her, assessing her daughter. Louisa was as much a beautiful woman as Mariah was, if not more so, since the decline in the latter woman’s health. Charlotte had done much in the way of pushing Louisa to the forefront of society, making sure the young woman lacked nothing by way of fashion, manners, and opportunity.

Why then was insipid Mariah in the garden walking arm in arm with

Lord Winchester, and Louisa was here seemingly unconcerned? Did the nitwit not understand that her chances to marry the Earl were slipping from her grasp?

Much too bothered to speak, Charlotte ignored her daughter's question and returned to looking out the window. Oh, how Mariah vexed her!

Marrying the Baron had been necessary for Charlotte to enter into the upper echelons of society, to become acquainted with the people who had ignored her for much of her life. The Baron had afforded her wealth and a title, allowing Charlotte to better provide for her daughter. The only fly in the ointment had been Mariah. Her beauty, cheerful nature, and grace had assured the young woman the love of all who met her, eclipsing anything Louisa could offer. Fortunately for Charlotte, she did not love Mariah. If anything, Charlotte detested her.

"Mama, come away from the window," Louisa urged. "You do yourself no favours staring as you do."

Charlotte did not move. Her daughter did not understand what was unfolding beneath her very nose, but Charlotte certainly did.

"'Tis only a matter of time before Mariah feels poorly again," Louisa argued. "She'll come inside, and the Earl will leave her."

Charlotte looked heavenward before turning around. "Why are you not the one down there at this very moment?"

Louisa's brow puckered. "What do you mean? John asked to walk

with Mariah, Mama. What could I have possibly done about that?"

"You imbecile! Have I taught you nothing? Mariah is wooing the Earl as we speak. If you could see what I am witnessing, you would be shaking in your shoes."

"You're overreacting," Louisa accused, turning red.

At that moment, Charlotte wanted to go over to her daughter and shake her until some sense entered her head.

"And you're not acting enough!" Charlotte hissed. "You should be the one clinging to the Earl right now. You should be the one laughing with him as though there is nothing in the world that is not amusing. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"You speak as though I have not tried," said Louisa, pouting.

"You have not tried hard enough. Need I remind you that it is in your best interests to reach the altar before Mariah does? Your chance of a wonderful life is currently in the arms of your stepsister, and yet you're here whining and complaining about how much you've done. You've done nothing!"

Louisa threw herself back on her seat, huffing loud enough for the entire household to hear her.

"Fine! Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

“You’re finally talking sense. Go down there and use any excuse you can think of to separate them.”

“Any excuse?”

“Anything,” Charlotte said with meaning,

“Very well.”

Louisa left without another word, not hearing the little prayer Charlotte offered up to the heavens.

“Let her be successful.”

Chapter 14

“You and Lucy were a mischievous pair, weren’t you?” said John.

Mariah grinned. “More so Lucy than me, but we did get up to some trouble in our youth.”

“In your youth?” said John, laughing. “But you’re still young.”

Mariah playfully hit his arm. “You know what I mean. We are young women now and do not get up to the tricks we used to. Well, me anyway. Lucy still has her moments.”

John did not know Martin’s sister well, but the little he knew told him that the woman had a rebellious streak. Mariah needed someone like that in her life because Lucy Dunn was no pushover.

“My lord!” called Louisa.

Mariah stilled beside him. “Louisa is calling you.”

That much was evident but didn’t mean John had to immediately respond. “I know.”

“Will you not answer her?”

“Are you so ready to be rid of me?” he countered.

Mariah’s eyes widened. “Oh, not at all. I have enjoyed our morning walk, but Louisa will not like being ignored. Best you see what she wants.”

“Tyrant, is she?” John asked.

Mariah didn’t respond, which was answer enough. Sighing, John turned with reluctance, waiting for Louisa to meet them.

“You two walked an awful lot,” the woman commented. “I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long, Mariah. Are you not tired?”

“I feel fine,” Mariah said softly.

“That’s what you say now,” Louisa countered. “But you should rest. Lord Winchester,” she said, now ignoring Mariah and favouring him. “Would you mind taking me to town in your gig? I simply must get some errands done and return well before it’s dark. Our own needs fixing, and it will take too long to hire a chaise.”

“Must it be done today?” John asked.

“Oh, yes,” the woman assured. “Please, my lord. I simply must get

them done today."

John felt obligated to agree, but he certainly didn't want to. "Very well. We can leave in a little while. Would you meet me by the gig? I'll be with you in a few moments."

Louisa paused for just a second. "Oh? I thought we might walk there together."

"I'll be with you in a moment, Louisa," John said firmly.

Louisa's jaw worked, but she managed a smile. "Of course. I'll just fetch my gloves and bonnet." The woman turned to Mariah. "Make sure to get some rest, Mariah. I do not want you fainting in the heat of the sun. It's dangerous."

"Thank you, Louisa. I'll make sure to enter the house soon."

"See that you do," the woman insisted with a note of hostility in her voice.

The woman walked off, giving one backward glance before entering the house. That one look was enough to tell John that she was not impressed about leaving them alone.

"You should go," Mariah urged. "Louisa is right. I should get into the house."

“And you will, but I must ask you if I will see you at the next ball tomorrow evening. I would love to dance with you once again.”

Mariah appeared bashful as she nodded. “Yes. I do intend to attend if I am able to.”

“Let’s hope you are,” said John, hardly able to contain his pleasure. “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Mariah.”

“And I, you, John.”

Hearing Mariah use his first name warmed him all over until he was quite giddy. John was reluctant to leave her, but he had given Louisa his word. They both walked into the house, separating at the foot of the staircase.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow evening?” he said.

“Yes. I’d like that.”

John watched Mariah ascend the stairs for a moment before realising how silly he looked and left to meet Louisa at his gig.

John was not two minutes into his ride with Louisa when he truly began to regret his decision to take her.

I could have come up with an excuse, for goodness' sake!

"This is one of the best gigs I've been in, my lord," the woman commented.

"Indeed?" he said drily. "I think it's much the same as any other."

"Oh no," Louisa insisted. "This is certainly a splendid one. Thank you once again for taking me into town. I do not know what I would have done if you had not been at the house."

"I'm certain you would have figured it out. You seem to be a resourceful woman."

"You do?" the woman said, clearly delighted. "What a kind thing to say."

It had not been a compliment, but John could probably say anything to the woman, and she would take it as a compliment. Not that he would be rude, but a little sarcasm never hurt anybody.

What would Mariah be doing right now? She had appeared much improved from the previous night and much like the woman he had met the very first time he danced with her. John had held onto that evening like a beacon of light, hoping to see the same woman. Today, his hope had been fulfilled, giving him further hope for the future.

I need to find a way to help Mariah. She deserves to feel this well every day, and not just scattered days that appear to be few and far between. It must be terrible to wake up, never knowing if it will be a good or bad day.

“I hope Mariah has taken to her bed,” Louisa said.

“Why send her to bed when she is well?”

“That is what you see now, but once she tires, ‘tis a mission to get her to her room,” the woman complained.

“And is that often?”

“Far too often,” Louisa replied bitterly. “Mama has taken care of Mariah ever since she fell ill. If Mariah would simply listen to Mama, she would not be so troublesome.”

That comment did not go down well with John. “She is your sister. How can she be troublesome? I’m confident Mariah would help you if you needed it.”

“But you don’t understand, my lord!” the woman protested. “We have done all we can and sacrificed much to help her. Is it so wrong to feel tired about it?”

John didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t imagine Mariah troubling them to the extent Louisa had spoken about. Mariah was meek, mild,

docile, and kind–why would she purposefully cause the Baroness and her daughter any grief? Something simply didn't sound right.

"Sickness is such a bore," Louisa continued after a while. "Mama and I are saints, I tell you. Would you mind leaving me at the apothecary? I need to pick up all the fortifying ingredients needed for Mariah's tea. It's the only thing that keeps her going."

"Does it truly help her?" he questioned.

"Yes, of course. Was she not well today? You said so yourself."

"I suppose you're right," John remarked.

Nothing was said beyond a profusely given 'thank you' as he helped Louisa down from the gig. As John watched Louisa enter the apothecary, he felt a little hope that Mariah would improve. Why else would she drink the tea?

John immediately sought Mariah out at the ball the following evening, excited to continue their conversation from their ramblings through the garden yesterday. He had seen the Baroness and Louisa, and had avoided them while searching for Mariah, but John couldn't see her anywhere. He eventually found her sitting alone, and to his dismay, she appeared ill. What had happened between then and now?

“Good evening, Mariah.”

A drowsy Mariah lifted her head, frowning a little. “John?”

Didn’t she recognise him? “Am I so forgettable?” he joked.

She coloured slightly. “I’m sorry. I suppose I’m a little disoriented. That happens sometimes.”

“Do not apologise for your illness,” he said a little more firmly than he wanted. “It’s not your fault,” he added, softening his tone.

There was no point taking out his frustration on Mariah. She wasn’t to blame for any of this.

“How are you?” she asked, her words somewhat slurred.

John thought about his answer carefully. If he said ‘well’ or ‘fine’, it might take a poke at her illness. “I feel happy seeing you this evening. Where is Lucy?” he inquired, forcing cheerfulness into his voice. “She is usually always by your side.”

“She has the one-hour rule,” Mariah answered.

John vaguely recalled hearing about it. “She doesn’t arrive at events until an hour has passed?” he asked.

“Precisely. She should be here any time now. I’ve been here for some time, or perhaps I have not been here long. I’m not entirely certain.”

Mariah yawned, her eyes closing. Was she asleep?

“Mariah?”

No answer.

“Do not worry, my lord,” said Louisa, appearing out of nowhere. “She will wake up soon enough.”

“Is this normal?”

Louisa nodded. “Absolutely. We try to find her a place away from most guests so she does not get in the way.”

Get in the way? That was a terrible way of referring to someone. Mariah stirred, her eyes opening slowly. She clearly had trouble keeping them open, but she appeared to be fighting whatever was weakening her. John wanted to fight her battles for her, but he didn’t know how to.

“Mariah, can I get you something to drink?” asked John.

“Oh, Mama already got her some wine,” Louisa said quickly.

Wine? That would surely make Mariah more sleepy. “Perhaps some chilled milk would be better,” he suggested.

“My mother knows what’s best for Mariah, my lord,” Louisa insisted with a bit of bite in her tone. “Do not concern yourself over such things. Oh, look, Hugh Hatcher is coming this way.”

John had left the man with a group of friends, but Hugh often grew bored with those who didn’t meet his status standard.

“Where did you get off to?” the man demanded. “One minute you were beside me, and the next, you were gone.” Hugh looked down, noticing Mariah. “Oh, I see. Is she well? Miss Nightingale seems dead asleep.”

“She’s not deaf,” John hissed under his breath.

Hugh pulled his head back, raising his palms. “My apologies. I didn’t mean any harm.”

“Don’t be silly, Mr Hatcher!” Louisa mused. “You haven’t caused any harm. Mariah likely didn’t hear you.”

John blinked repeatedly, his mind grappling with the urge to retaliate

on Mariah's behalf and to remain polite for her sake. What was wrong with these people? Had they no sensitivity?

"Mr Hatcher?" he heard Hugh say. "I can never be so formal with such a beautiful woman."

"Would Hugh be better?" Louisa asked, batting her eyelashes.

They were flirting while Mariah lay ill before them. How was it that Hugh and Louisa could go on with life when someone else was suffering? It wasn't a case of someone suffering in another town, but a woman so close to them that they could reach out and touch her. None of this was appropriate.

John sat down beside Mariah, making sure to keep a respectable distance between them.

"Mariah?" he called.

Her head rolled towards him. "Yes?"

"Do you need anything?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Don't let me keep you from the ball."

John hoped Mariah wasn't pushing him away. "I prefer to remain here. If that's fine with you?"

"Yes, if you like."

"I would. Very much."

Mariah didn't respond as her eyes had fluttered closed again. John could tell she wasn't sleeping by her breathing, but she wasn't fully aware of her surroundings either. Still, John continued to speak to Mariah, appreciating every little response.

"How many weeks do you have remaining on your lease?" John heard Louisa ask Hugh.

"Four or more," Hugh answered.

It dawned on John that the end of summer was fast approaching, which meant he would leave Cheltenham soon. What would become of Mariah once he left? John couldn't bear the thought of her being ill for the rest of her life. Something occurred to John, troubling him.

"Mariah, can you hear me?"

"Mhmm."

“Louisa went to the apothecary today to pick up some ingredients for you. Did you take them?”

“Mhmm.”

She had? Then why was she in this state? It didn’t make any sense. “But you’re not any better.”

“I know,” Mariah replied, sitting up a little straighter. “They don’t always work. Sometimes my illness is too severe, and the tea can do nothing.”

Then why take it? Perhaps Mariah needed to increase her dosage. Surely the apothecary would have realised this by now?

“Then why take the tea?” John asked.

“John, may I speak to you for just a moment?” Louisa interrupted.

Her request came out of nowhere, startling him into agreeing. “If you wish.”

Louisa stood a few paces away from Hugh, who looked uncomfortable to be left alone with Mariah. John noted that Mariah had not noticed he was no longer beside her. He would have felt slighted if not for her condition.

“What is it you wish to talk about?”

“I do not think it wise to question Mariah when she is so ill. She has to use a lot of her strength to respond, and that only further weakens her. Leave her to rest.”

What Louisa said made sense, but John didn’t want to leave Mariah’s side. “Can I at least sit with her?”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Louisa insisted. “Why don’t we give her a little room? Mama will come to check on her in a while. ‘Tis my experience that we should leave Mariah to recover on her own. She’d be terribly embarrassed if she knew you were hovering about her so.”

John begrudgingly agreed with Louisa. Mariah did not like to inconvenience anyone and would be distressed if he paid her too much attention.

“Are you certain your mother will come to see her?” he pressed.

“Of course,” Louisa assured. “Mama knows precisely how to handle Mariah.”

Handle Mariah? John didn’t like the sound of that. He did as Louisa requested, but his gaze strayed to Mariah throughout the evening. She never improved, and the Baroness only attended to Mariah to ply her with more wine. How could that help Mariah?

As the night came to an end, John's worry about Mariah's health and overall well-being only increased. Why? Why was she so much on his mind? John wasn't certain, but he realised that his feelings for Mariah were more profound than he initially thought.

Chapter 15

Breakfast in Tottenham House was not usually a cheerful hour, but Louisa appeared to be in great spirits ever since the night of the ball. Mariah was glad for her, but she wished the woman would not make her feel any worse than Mariah already did.

I've heard her retell this story over and over again, and each time I manage to sound worse and worse. I no longer have an accurate view of my illness that evening.

"Mama, did you see me dance with Lord Winchester?" Louisa asked.

"For the umpteenth time, yes!" the Baroness said, laughing. "My, I do not think you will allow me to forget it!"

"Nor I," Mariah murmured, staring at her plate.

The table fell silent. Did they hear her? Mariah was almost too scared to lift her head, but she was also too frightened not to. Slowly, she looked up, finding both the Baroness and Louisa staring at her.

"Is something the matter?" Mariah asked.

"What was that you said?" Louisa demanded. "I think she was mocking me, Mama!"

“Not at all,” Mariah denied. “I was only looking at my plate and talking.”

“You were talking to your plate?” said the Baroness. “Has your illness finally caused you to lose your mind?”

Louisa snickered at that. “It was only a matter of time. The Earl certainly thought she had taken leave of her senses.”

The Baroness and Louisa’s mention of her losing her mind did not bother Mariah, but it would if the Earl had said something. Mariah wondered if John had spoken to Louisa about her.

“What did John say to you?” she asked.

“John?” Louisa repeated. “How dare you call him that! Do you think that your status as a Baron’s daughter gives you the right to be familiar with him?”

Once again, Mariah’s status as a gentleman’s daughter was thrown in her face. When would Louisa let it be? Mariah could hardly help being a Baron’s daughter.

“The Earl insisted I use his first name,” Mariah replied, alarmed by the vehemence in the woman’s face. “I would never have used it otherwise.”

“You lie!” Louisa spat.

“Now, now, dear,” the Baroness lightly admonished. “Mariah is many things, but she is no liar. The Earl must have felt pity for her and allowed her use of his name, or perhaps she misheard him.”

“Oh no, my lady,” Mariah protested. “I certainly heard him. It was the morning he came to inquire after my health.”

“As I said, he felt pity for you,” the Baroness insisted. “Gracious men like the Earl have kind hearts, you see.”

Mariah had not seen an ounce of pity in John’s face that day. Concern yes, but Mariah was confident she had not been pitied. If anything, John had enjoyed her company, as she had his. Why else would he ask if she was going to attend the ball?

Well, I did, but I should have remained at home. I could barely keep my own name straight.

Mariah didn’t respond to the Baroness’ words, choosing to finish her breakfast instead. Dipping a slice of toast into her egg yolk, Mariah wondered how to communicate her remorse for her illness at the ball. She knew John would say it wasn’t her fault, but he had been looking forward to dancing with her. Mariah didn’t want him to think she was using her illness to avoid him.

“I think I need a new dress, Mama,” said Louisa. “I heard the Earl’s favourite colour is blue. I think I only have two walking dresses in

blue. I need an evening gown in blue. Not navy like a mourning woman, but a light, playful blue. I wish to look my best when I next see him."

Louisa spoke as though the Earl were interested in her. It was strange because John had never mentioned or asked anything about Louisa in Mariah's presence. Could the woman possibly be reading into something that simply did not exist?

Unless I am the one mistaken, but I do not think so. John has seemed more annoyed with Louisa's presence whenever I was with him.

"You can have two, my dear," said the Baroness, beaming at her daughter. "One for a dinner party and the other for the last ball of the season. I am certain it shall be a grand event."

Mariah thought to ask if she could have a dress as well, but she knew what the Baroness would say. She believed a new dress would be wasted on Mariah. However, Mariah had been attending events more than usual and always looked so shabby when compared to the other women.

She had learnt not to be embarrassed about her lack of fashion as her illness was embarrassing enough, but lately, it had become more important to Mariah to look like someone worth noting. To make matters worse, even her tightest of clothing were growing loose on her frame.

Mariah knew it was due to the illness and worried that she would be turned into skin and bones before long. Why was the tea not working? Had her condition indeed progressed so far beyond treatment? The thought frightened her.

“Mariah!”

Mariah jerked in her seat, staring wide-eyed at the Baroness. “My lady?”

“I’ve called you twice already. What is wrong with you, girl?”

“I’m sorry, my lady. I think I’m a little tired this morning.”

“Surely fatigue does not affect your hearing?” the woman said. “Oh, never mind that now. I’ve been thinking about your condition, dear, and now realise that I can do nothing else to help you.”

The Baroness’ words sounded ominous. “What do you mean, my lady?”

“Are you so daft that you cannot comprehend plain English?” Louisa mocked. “It seems having all those fancy governesses did you no good.”

“Oh, hush Louisa,” said the Baroness, barely able to conceal her chuckle. “We must never resort to such insults. Now, what I meant was that I cannot continue to care for you in the capacity you need and have thus decided to send you away to a place where you can receive better treatment.”

Mariah's lower belly clenched painfully. "You're sending me away?"

"Do not look at it like that," insisted the Baroness. "I want to see you well, dear Mariah, and that will not happen here. I have family in London who are in contact with a physician who can help you. You will leave soon."

The floor seemed to give way under Mariah's feet as though she was being dragged by an unknown force, or at least, that is how she felt. Cheltenham was all Mariah had ever known, and this was her home. Yes, she had considered leaving and taking a post as a governess, but that had only been a dream. However, this was not a dream.

"Oh, stop looking as though your world has ended," Louisa scolded. "Mama has done you a great favour. She wishes to see you healthy and well, but you are so ungrateful that you cannot even thank her. Do you want to die from this illness?"

"Do not be so harsh, Louisa," the Baroness scolded. "'Tis a shock for Mariah, that is all. I'm confident she understands the importance of the situation. You do, don't you, dear?"

Mariah nodded numbly. "I do, my lady. May I go up to my room?"

"But your breakfast is not finished."

"I am no longer hungry."

The Baroness nodded. “Very well. Off you go. I’ll come to see you in a moment to further discuss your departure.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Mariah quietly pushed her chair back and left the room, her feet dragging as she climbed the stairs to her room.

“How can this be true?” Mariah cried softly to herself. “Leave my home?”

Why hadn’t the Baroness discussed this with her before? Perhaps Mariah would have felt better if she had been part of the decision to go. The Baroness’ words had sounded final as though Mariah would never return to her home, but surely no one could be that cruel?

The Baroness found Mariah staring into nothing as she sat at her window. Mariah didn’t hear her approach until the woman appeared beside her.

“Have you given my decision some thought?”

That was all Mariah could think about. “Yes, my lady.”

“And do you understand why I am sending you to London? It’s for your own good, Mariah,” said the Baroness, gently taking Mariah’s chin in her grasp. “I’m tired of seeing you suffer so much. I promised

your father that I would look after you, and that is precisely what I am doing. I am certain he would have agreed with me."

Would he? Mariah wasn't so confident. She looked out of the window again and imagined herself flying away.

"Are you listening, Mariah?"

The Baroness' voice was tinged with annoyance, but Mariah found she didn't care at that moment.

"May I write a letter to Lord Winchester?" she asked. "I wish to apologise for my behaviour at the ball. He deserves an explanation. I would also like to ask him to see me in the garden once more."

The older woman's eyes widened slightly. "Well, yes, if you feel you must, dear. But do not get your hopes up too high. I do not want you to feel sad when he does not come."

Mariah wasn't worried about that; she knew in her gut that John would come. She was more surprised that the Baroness had given her consent.

"Thank you, my lady. I'll write the letter now."

"You do that, dear."

Mariah took out her writing materials as soon as the Baroness left and began to pour her heart out on the sheets of paper. She expressed her deepest regrets at potentially ruining his evening but felt she sounded pathetic, so she scrunched up the piece of paper and tried again. It was a waste of paper as it was so costly, but Mariah hardly ever used her stationery except to send Lucy a note or two.

Mariah started again, reaching the halfway mark when she heard one knock before Tessa stuck her head around the door. The maid was too familiar with Mariah to worry much about protocol at times, and Mariah never scolded her for it. Tessa never dared do it with the Baroness or Louisa, or she would be given her marching orders.

“I have a letter for you, Miss,” the maid said.

Another one? Mariah’s heart lifted as she recognised the envelope in the maid’s hand. “Thank you, Tessa. Did it just arrive?”

“Yes, Miss. Louisa took it from the postman and asked that I send it straight up to you.”

Mariah took the letter, inspecting to see if the seal had been tampered with. The flower in the seal did not look fiddled with, as did the others. Mariah had been sure that Louisa would try to read her letters, but perhaps she had been wrong about the woman.

“Thank you, Tessa. That will be all.”

Tessa curtsied and left. Eagerly opening the letter, Mariah devoured

the words it contained. Her joy soon fell to despair as the truth of the message became all too clear.

Mariah,

No words can express my sadness to witness such poor health. I would take your place to give you relief, but alas, that is not to be so. No one deserves to be so overcome by such a mysterious disease, least of all such a gentle lady such as yourself. I hope you get well.

I value our friendship immensely and hope that you do so as well. That being said, I have a favour that I must simply ask of you. I'm afraid that I have fallen in love with the most beautiful creature I have ever met. She is no stranger to you, and in fact, you are the one who helped my affection grow. After spending much time with Louisa and helping her about town, I've come to realise that I have fallen in love with her.

Dear Mariah, I need your advice to best approach her and make an offer for her hand. Of course, I shall court her for a season, but not too long. I simply cannot wait any longer and beg you to answer my letter with haste. I shall send a footman tomorrow morning to fetch your letter.

It wasn't signed, but once again, it was obvious who it was from. John wanted Louisa, not her. Mariah dropped the letter and uttered a pitiful cry, falling to the floor in a crumpled heap. Clutching her chest, Mariah sobbed, the violence of her tears jerking her body uncontrollably.

The door was wrenched open, but Mariah didn't care who it was. She was vaguely aware of the Baroness' voice and a pair of hands lifting her from the floor and helping her to the bed.

“Tessa!” she heard the Baroness bellow, the sound ringing in Mariah’s ears. “Fetch the apothecary!”

Mariah continued to cry, hardly stopping when draughts were administered to her. Finally, she calmed down as the medicine took effect, but tears continued to slip down her face.

“It’ll be all right again, Miss,” said a distraught Tessa, stroking her hair. “Please, don’t cry.”

No, it would never be all right again. Mariah thought of all the times her health and choices had pushed John and Louisa together. It was all her fault, wasn’t it? Mariah felt dead inside, a relief from the pain of her broken heart. All hope was lost.

Chapter 16

John sighed, setting down his pen to rub his face. He was exhausted, but he needed to write this letter. John didn't know how many times he had tried to start, but he would eventually give up when no words came to mind. What must Mariah think of him? It had been days since he had seen her, but John would have called on her if he had not been so busy.

Days had been spent trying to find a cure for Mariah, consulting with various medical authorities and listening to their opinions. The Hatcher's neighbours would undoubtedly be wondering who was so sick to need that many physicians and apothecaries.

"If they have not inquired already," said John to himself. "These neighbours are rather nosey."

No more nosey than those of his own neighbourhood, but Cheltenham seemed far worse. Perhaps he felt that way because his patience was wearing thin. John needed a solution to Mariah's illness; he needed to see her well. Nothing else mattered right now.

Hugh walked into the room unannounced, shaking his head. "Was that another physician I saw leaving the house?"

"Yes. Dr Keeble."

"That must be the tenth or eleventh physician you've seen, not counting the apothecaries and surgeons. Just how many medical

authorities are you going to summon to Cheltenham before you're satisfied?"

"As many as it takes to finally come up with the answers I need."

"You're serious, aren't you? And all for Miss Nightingale. What is your relationship with her? I know that you fancy her, but you're putting much work into an unknown outcome."

"That's my business," John retorted, annoyed by all the questions. "What is so wrong with wanting to help Mariah?"

"Nothing, I suppose. Would you like to occupy your mind for a little while? A game of cards should do well."

"I'm expecting another apothecary soon."

"I'll bring the cards here, and we can play until the man arrives. I've hardly seen you away from this room for some days, and our stay in Cheltenham is soon coming to an end. Will it hurt to spend time with a friend?"

John rubbed his eyes. Hugh would continue to push the matter until John capitulated.

"Fine, one game of cards," said John.

Hugh grinned. “That’s what I wanted to hear. I’ll fetch the table and cards. Shall we make a wager?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Are you so afraid I’ll win?”

“No. I’m afraid you’ll want to keep on going and badger me for another game. You know how you are when there is money involved.”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “You’re a bad sport, you know that? But a game is a game. We can go riding once the apothecary has left. Martin is sure to be at home, and I wouldn’t mind seeing Lucy.”

John raised his eyebrows. “You’re going back and forth between two women.”

Hugh had expressed his interest in Lucy Dunn and Louisa Cull, but so far, both women had largely ignored his advances. Louisa flirted a little with him, but John knew she was primarily interested in him. Unfortunately for the woman, John much preferred Mariah. Louisa was a self-centred woman who hid her true nature behind coy smiles and cheerful laughter. However, her eyes always held a coldness and hunger that revealed the contents of her heart. John felt sorry for her.

“Both are beautiful,” said Hugh with a shrug. “I don’t wish to waste my chances with either of them.”

John snorted. “That is if you have a chance with either of them.”

“Do you think that because you are an Earl, you are the only one who stands a chance?” said Hugh with a challenge in his eyes. “My family has money, and that is enough for any woman.”

John pulled his head back in surprise. “When did I mention anything about status? Neither Louisa nor Lucy have shown you any interest because they know you’re not serious. You’re far too flirtatious and come across as a man not to be trusted with their hearts. What did you expect?”

Hugh’s brow puckered into a deep frown. “Is that what they think of me?”

“I have no doubts. Mentioning how much money you have does not help you either.”

“I thought women wanted to know if a man can provide for them,” Hugh argued.

“These women live in Cheltenham, Hugh. I’m confident they know enough about your family already. If you are interested in either of them, I suggest you stop speaking about money, choose one woman, and woo her. Playing Casanova will not help you.”

John’s words appeared to hit Hugh hard because the man sat down instead of getting the cards and table.

“I never thought about it that way. I thought women liked a rakish man.”

“I admit that some do, but Lucy does not seem to appreciate that quality in a man. Martin has mentioned more than once that his sister despises womanisers. Louisa is intent upon marriage and likely doesn’t have the time to entertain a rake. You’ve been going about it all wrong, my friend.”

“Clearly,” Hugh mused. “I suppose I shall have to rethink my strategy, but that can be done over a game of cards. Give me a moment.”

Hugh hurried out of the room, returning moments later with said table and cards. He dealt them out, leaning back in his seat as he grinned.

“This is going to be an interesting game,” he said.

“If I can keep my mind from wandering,” John confessed. “I’m afraid it’s too full of thoughts, opinions, and possible solutions. Who knew the medical world was so interesting? I might have been a physician if I had not been an earl.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” Hugh accused. “What sane man would wish to see blood, pus, and other body excretions? I can hardly handle my own without dealing with that of others. Being an earl is far better.”

“I’m not repulsed by such things, Hugh. It’s part of nature. Imagine having the knowledge to cure someone? I daresay I would have to mix

medical science with herbal knowledge as the two go hand in hand. I've heard of traditional healers that are more trusted than physicians. My mother often visited an old woman who helped her with her headaches and nightmares."

"Did whatever the old woman prescribed work?" Hugh asked, slapping a card on the table.

John stared at his own cards, deciding which one should counter Hugh's play. "My mother was too lazy to keep up with the prescription. She wanted an easy way out of everything."

John finally played a card, smiling when Hugh groaned. Perhaps John wasn't as distracted as he thought he would be.

"Why not find a traditional healer for Mariah?" the man suggested.

"That's my last resort. If science cannot help me, herbalism will."

"I suppose that makes sense," said Hugh. "I hear that some physicians stayed overnight before leaving the next day. Have some travelled from far?"

"I dispatched requests to every single surgeon, physician, and apothecary within a fifty-mile radius to help Mariah find a more effective treatment for her illness."

John played another card, looking to Hugh for his turn. The man took

his time, his eyes narrowed with concentration. Poking out his tongue, Hugh selected his next play. Fortunately for John, it wasn't quite good enough.

"Where is your mind?" he asked his friend.

"It's your fault," Hugh accused. "I'm trying to wrap my head around your decisions, and it's blocking my ability to play. Don't you think it madness to call on all these people when they can't even see the patient they're discussing?"

John ignored him as a servant knocked on the door and announced that Mr Jones had arrived.

"Instead of questioning me, why don't you help me welcome the man? He's the last apothecary for the day."

"For the day?" cried Hugh, aghast at the thought of more.

"Yes, but if Mr Jones proves useful, I will not need to speak with anyone else."

John left his seat, followed by Hugh, who continued to grumble behind him. The man could certainly whine and complain when things did not go his way.

Doubt filled John when he first saw Mr Jones. The man appeared feeble, small, and nervous as he clutched his leather bag to his chest.

“Good day, Mr Jones. I’m Lord Winchester, and this is Mr Hugh Hatcher. I am the one who called you here.”

Mr Jones nodded. “How do you do, my lord?”

“As well as can be expected. Would you follow me? We’ll take our tea in the drawing-room and discuss the matter there.”

The small man followed them, not allowing a servant to take his bag from him. John let it be, assuming the man had something in it that was important to him. They were all comfortably seated before John launched into the discussion. He named every symptom he could think of, Mariah’s condition when she fell ill, and the foul-smelling tea she often drank to help her.

“The illness is quite a mystery,” said John. “Miss Nightingale never knows when she shall fall ill. She can wake up well but take a turn for the worse within the hour. When I first met her, she appeared normal and healthy but so weakened during our second meeting that I was taken aback. The last ball was by far the worst I have seen of her condition. Miss Nightingale could hardly keep her eyes open, and she slurred her words as though she had been drinking. I know her stepmother was giving her wine to perhaps alleviate the stress, but I do not think it did much to help.”

“How long has she had this illness?” Mr Jones asked.

“Ever since her father died, I’m told. Perhaps several months ago, maybe more than a year.”

“That is strange,” the man admitted. “This case reminds me of one I came across several years ago. A man’s mistress was jealous of his wife and used high doses of valerian to incapacitate the woman. She couldn’t live a normal life because she was always bedridden, weak, and sometimes incoherent. Fortunately, the husband did have some affection for his wife and was able to catch his mistress adding valerian to the wife’s food and tea.”

“Remind me to never take on a mistress when I get married,” Hugh commented. “But I thought valerian was good at calming one down. My mother uses valerian for her sleep problems.”

“Yes,” Mr Jones admitted. “Valerian is helpful for those with sleeping problems, anxiety, depression, and womanly issues, but high doses can lead to constant fatigue.”

John considered the man’s words, applying them to what he knew about Mariah’s condition. Valerian was undoubtedly a good candidate, but it didn’t explain everything. Mariah suffered from severe symptoms that surpassed those the apothecary had mentioned.

“Miss Nightingale does not only suffer from fatigue but dizziness and weakness,” said John. “I do not think valerian has anything to do with it.”

Mr Jones nodded. “That would be true, but you mentioned that she consumed a large amount of wine during your observation.”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“It has a lot to do with it, my lord,” the apothecary insisted. “High doses of valerian can make anyone ill, but if you couple that with alcohol, then you have a recipe for disaster. Suppose Miss Nightingale drinks some valerian before heading to a party. She might seem merely sleepy at first, but the minute she consumes alcohol and continues to do so through the night, her strength will leave her. She won’t be able to stand on her own, keep awake, or at times talk as her mind will be under the influence of both the valerian and alcohol. The two substances should never mix, my lord.”

Stunned, John could only stare at the little man. Could that be the cause of Mariah’s mystery illness? John wanted to say yes but was worried he might get his hopes up too high only to have them dashed to pieces when he realised he had not found the culprit to her sickness.

“I’m inclined to believe you, Mr Jones,” said Hugh, surprising John. “A maid once incorrectly mixed a dosage in some tea for my mother, and she drank wine just before going to bed. She collapsed on the stairs on her way to bed and gave us all quite a scare. We soon realised what had happened. I cannot find any flaw in your logic.”

John’s heart beat faster. The more he heard, the more he believed, but who would give Mariah such high doses? Surely, they would not ply her with wine, knowing that she had consumed the valerian?

I cannot believe anyone would be that cruel. There has to be a misunderstanding between the servants and the Baroness.

“Could the high dose be given mistakenly?” John questioned.

The apothecary shook his head. “I find that highly doubtful. Why do you ask?”

“Earlier, I mentioned a tea Miss Nightingale regularly drinks. It has a pungent odour and could be the vessel used to give her the valerian, but I’m not entirely certain because the flowers do not smell like that.”

“Could you explain its smell?”

“It has a strong earthy odour and not the good ‘just after rain’ sort of smell.”

“That would be the valerian, my lord,” the apothecary replied. “The flowers do have a delicate smell, but the medicinal version of the plant smells different. It has a strong earthy odour, just as you said. It seems Miss Nightingale is consuming far too much valerian and taking in alcohol with it. That’s a dangerous combination.”

John knew Mariah would never do that to herself. That left the Baroness and her daughter. John’s hands curled into fists as rage simmered below the surface of his calm façade.

“Would you accompany me to Miss Nightingale’s home, Mr Jones?”

It was time to put things right.

Chapter 17

Lucy wished the hired carriage would go faster. For days she had felt that something was amiss, but this morning was certainly the worst day of all. She had hoped to hear from Mariah and had even sent a note to her, but Lucy had received nothing in return. That wasn't like Mariah. Lucy's concern took a turn for the worse when she overheard bits of hushed conversation between Martin, John, and Hugh.

"I asked them what they meant by their discussion of my friend, but they refused to tell me a thing!" she exclaimed to herself. "Can you imagine that? I am Mariah's friend, and yet they think to keep any information away from me."

Lucy had expressed her displeasure, but the men had ignored her all the same. What was it about men and their thoughts of grandeur? They evidently believed they were the only ones who could discuss Mariah and whatever challenge she was facing. Didn't they understand that she was the best friend who knew her better than anyone else?

"Fools!" she muttered under her breath.

Well, it was high time she did something about her concern, which was why Lucy was currently on her way to the Nightingale's house. Lucy wanted to get to the bottom of the problem and find out why Mariah had not replied to the message. Had something happened to prevent her from doing so? Lucy sincerely hoped not. Mariah had been through enough heartache and hardship in her life. She didn't need the added stress of anything else.

Lucy leaned forward, tapping the driver on his shoulder. “Please, would you go faster?”

“Nearly there, Miss. I can’t move any faster than this, you know. Too many horses in front of me.”

Lucy looked ahead, noting the horses and their riders taking a leisurely ramble to who knew where. She wished she could say something that would make a noise and force them to step to the side.

The driver sped up again, passing a few riders before slowing down once more. What now? She peeked around the driver’s large body, seeing some of the horse riders had slowed their pace. Lucy had had enough of this.

“Get out of the way!” she yelled. “Yes, you!” she added when one of the riders pointed at his chest. “Can’t you see we need to get through? You cannot take over the road as though you owned it!”

The driver glanced behind him, his expressions full of respect. “No gentle lady has ever yelled like that before, Miss.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Lucy replied. “And it appears my shouting has done the job. Move on before they change their minds.”

As Lucy’s carriage passed the riders, she heard comments of ‘rude’ and ‘who does she think she is?’ thrown her way. Lucy let the criticism fall like water down a duck’s back. She had no time to fret about a few slow riders when she felt such urgency to see her dear friend.

It took another ten minutes or so, but Lucy finally arrived at the Nightingale house.

"You be sure to hire me again, Miss," the driver said. "I'll let you go for free next time if you yell at more of those dandies."

Lucy almost smiled. "Next time will be as soon as I am done here. You had best keep your word."

She ran up the front steps of the house as fast as her legs would take her, pounding on the door. Tessa opened it, her eyes red and swollen. What on earth had happened to the maid? Lucy's heart dropped as a terrible thought entered her mind.

"Where is Mariah?" she demanded.

"In her room, Miss Dunn," Tessa sniffed.

Lucy didn't bother asking what had happened but picked up her skirts and took the stairs two at a time. It was unladylike and unseemly, but the devil take it! She needed to know what was wrong with Mariah.

Lucy was not one to knock on any door, especially that of her brother or Mariah, so she walked right in, almost falling over a trunk stationed by the door. Looking around the room, Lucy could hardly see Mariah behind the clothes strewn on every surface and the trunks open, some half-filled with clothing.

“What on earth–!”

“Lucy?” said a surprised Mariah, emerging from behind a monstrosity of a trunk. “I didn’t know you were coming today.”

“What is going on, Mariah?” Lucy demanded, her hands splayed open. “What is all this chaos? Are you *leaving*?”

Mariah’s cheeks pinkened. “Oh, well. You see, I’m going away for a little while.”

“Whatever for?” asked Lucy, bewildered by it all. “Where are you going?”

“Just a moment,” said Mariah, holding up her index finger before pushing some clothes off her bed. “Come and sit down, Lucy. I have some news to tell you. I was going to send a letter, but I can now tell you face-to-face.”

Lucy didn’t budge. “You were going to go without saying goodbye?”

“I wasn’t sure if the Baroness would allow me out of the house to see you, so I was going to send a letter with Tessa explaining everything.”

Lucy’s mind failed to grasp the words coming out of her best friend’s mouth. Picking her way through the mess, Lucy reached where Mariah

stood, drawing her down to the cleared space on the bed.

“Now, tell me everything from the very beginning. I’m afraid I cannot comprehend the words you are saying.”

Mariah took a deep breath, expelling it shakily. “I’m leaving for London today.”

“But why? Why the suddenness? This is the work of that evil witch, isn’t it?”

“Hush, Lucy,” Mariah scolded. “Do not say such things. The Baroness might hear you.”

“Oh, pish, posh!” Lucy cried. “Let her hear me, for I do not care one iota. Now, tell me why that witch is banishing you to London? Why does she wish to take you away from us?”

“It will only be until I am better,” Mariah explained. “The Baroness has family in London who know of an excellent physician who may be able to help me. You see, there is nothing more to be done for me here, Lucy. My illness has progressed, and the special tea from the apothecary no longer works.”

Lucy pursed her lips, looking her friend over. Mariah appeared to be in perfect health today. A tad pale and somewhat distraught, which was perfectly understandable, but she was fine other than that.

“If the illness has worsened as you say, why do I find you in good health today?”

“You know how it is. One minute I’m fine, and the next, I can hardly stand. Only when I’m unwell, I’m terribly sick. Look at what happened at the last ball. You were not present to see the beginning of it. I was useless, Lucy. I could hardly stand on my own, and poor John tried to keep me company, but I could hardly acknowledge his presence. I feel horrible about it.”

“Why feel horrible? The Earl knows of your illness. Wait, you called him John. Are you now so familiar with him?”

Mariah looked away. “No. I would rather not speak of it, Lucy. Perhaps you can help me pack,” Mariah suggested, turning back to her. “I have a lot to do before we leave this afternoon.”

Help her best friend pack and leave? Hard luck! Lucy had a good mind to find the Baroness and give her an earful for treating her friend this way. How dare she send Mariah away? Lucy had a strong feeling that this was but a scheme to get Mariah out of the way so Louisa can take her place in society.

“Do you indeed think it necessary to leave?” Lucy asked. “Can the physician not come here?”

Mariah shook her head sadly. “The Baroness was firm about this. She says I can only receive superior medical advice in London and must stay there for my treatment. Once I am well enough, I shall return to Cheltenham. Cheer up, Lucy. It won’t be forever.”

But Lucy felt it would be. She didn't trust Lady Tottenham's intentions one bit.

"Why not bring the apothecary to your home? Let him see your symptoms and hear what you have to say about your mysterious illness from your own mouth. There's no reason to leave."

"The Baroness has assured me that the apothecary can do no more for me," Mariah replied. "Her family knows of a powerful physician who might just be able to treat me. Won't it be wonderful to see me with such joy and cheer again? Why, I'll run all the way from London to Cheltenham if I have to!"

Lucy bowed her head, shaking it slightly. This was just too soon. Why did it feel as though Mariah were leaving before anyone could hear of it? The Baroness likely knew there would be questions raised, and she wanted to avoid anyone stopping her plans. Well, the woman never factored in Lucy's determination.

"Why not stay one more day? Surely the witch will allow that."

Mariah smiled miserably. "I didn't want to say this, but I know you'll keep pushing until you know everything."

"Know what?" Lucy asked warily, her heart thudding painfully against her chest. "You're not dying, are you?"

"What? No! Why would you think that?"

Lucy felt so lightheaded that she had to lie down. She put a hand to her chest, still feeling her heart beating a mile a minute.

“Lucy, you silly goose,” Mariah lightly admonished. “Why would you think such a thing? I may be sick, but I do not plan on dying. Not any time soon that is.”

“Not any time soon,” said Lucy sitting up. “We made a pact that we would die together. I’m not ready to die yet, and neither will you. Now, if it’s not that, then what do you wish to tell me?”

“It’s rather embarrassing, but you’re my best friend, and I know you won’t judge me.”

“Of course not. I am the one who is more likely to have the embarrassing news.”

Mariah grinned, the first spark showing in her eyes since Lucy arrived. “That is true, but I’m afraid I’m the one with the news today. I agreed to leave today because I do not wish to see John and Louisa together.”

“See them together?” Lucy asked, confused. “But we’ve seen them together before. What is terrible about that?”

“You do not understand, Lucy. I mean together romantically. John and Louisa have fallen in love.”

The room went silent as Lucy stared at her friend, wondering if she had lost her senses.

"No!" Lucy eventually cried. "You lie! That can never be, and I shall not believe it. I know what I saw, Mariah Nightingale. The Earl is interested in you, and I daresay he carries a *tendre* for you. Why would you think he and Louisa are an item? Have you gone mad? What proof do you have?"

Mariah got up quite suddenly, moving to open the drawer of her vanity table. She pulled out three folded papers, bringing them to Lucy.

"This is all the proof for you to see what I mean. The first two seem to relate to his interest in me, but it abruptly changes in the last one. I'm afraid I am the one to blame for that. I pushed them together."

"The letters say that?" Lucy asked, taking them.

"Not directly, but just read them, and you'll see what I mean. All the proof is in there."

Lucy was still unconvinced, but she read them anyway. She needed to see what Mariah was on about because Lucy was confident her friend imagined things that were not there. The first letter seemed a little dandyish and didn't sound like John at all. Lucy noticed it wasn't signed with his name, but she could understand why Mariah would think the letters were from John.

Lucy read the other two, her delicate brow puckering. This didn't make any sense.

"He hasn't signed any of them," she pointed out. "These might not be from the Earl."

"You doubt their authenticity?"

"I do. I simply do not believe John wrote any of these letters."

"Have you seen his signature?" Mariah asked. "Have you seen his penmanship?"

"No," said Lucy slowly. "But–"

"But nothing, Lucy. You have no proof that this is not John. Who else can it be? He is the only one I danced with, the only one I pushed into Louisa's arms. It has to be him."

Lucy's heard her friend's voice break at the end. She set the letters aside, leaning her head on Mariah's shoulder as she embraced her.

"Oh, Mariah. I'm so sorry. I did overhear John mention to Martin that he wishes to write to you, but I don't know if he did. I have no reliable way of proving these are not from him, but my instincts tell me they are not. Won't you consider the possibility?"

Mariah shook her head, pulling away. “I cannot afford to allow my heart to break any more than it already has. I am leaving today, and that is that. Nothing will change my mind.”

Nothing Lucy said would dissuade Mariah otherwise; the woman was committed to leaving that afternoon. Lucy took her leave soon after, eager to rush home to inform her brother, John and Hugh, in the hopes that the men would know how to stop her best friend. Mariah couldn’t leave. She just couldn’t.

Chapter 18

Mariah sat cross-legged on her bed, staring at her bedroom door. Lucy had left at least ten minutes ago, but she had not been able to continue her packing. So much still had to be done because Mariah was essentially taking all her belongings with her, but she had not been able to do anything since Lucy left. The Baroness would not be pleased if she saw her simply sitting about, but Mariah felt she could even brave the woman's scoldings at that moment.

Seeing Lucy reminded Mariah of all she was leaving behind, and it sat around her neck like a millstone. How could she leave behind the ones she loved? Mariah understood that it was for her own good, but Lucy was right. Why couldn't the physician come here? The answer to that came rather quickly to her mind.

Mariah bowed her head, remembering she was an unwanted responsibility. Sometimes she questioned her father's decision to leave her absolutely nothing and give it all to the Baroness. Mariah never dared speak about her doubts to the Baroness for fear of reprimand, but she longed to do so.

"Papa would never leave me without an inheritance," she told herself. "I did nothing to prove my unworthiness. I know what the Baroness said, but I must admit to myself that I do not fully believe her."

It just seemed strange. Mariah had been close to her father, as close as any doting daughter could be. She laughed at herself, mocking her sudden need to question everything. Mariah had left well enough alone since her father's death, but now she wanted answers.

Dared she ask them? Likely not. It was too late now, anyway. It was only a matter of hours before Mariah was due to leave. It seemed pointless to bring up such questions and make her stepmother angry moments before her departure.

"Lucy has certainly not made things easy," Mariah mused sadly. "I feel I might have given in to her request had she not left when she did. Why did she leave as though hell's hounds were at her heels? I could not have driven her away, could I?"

Perhaps Lucy was upset. Mariah's friend was accustomed to getting her way, and Mariah usually allowed it, but this time it was different. Even if Mariah had wanted to stay, she could not have done so, not with all she knew about John and Louisa. How could anyone expect her to witness the blossoming love between them?

Mariah had foolishly believed that she had been John's love interest, but how could any man put up with her illness? She couldn't force that upon anyone. Perhaps it was better for John to choose a healthy, beautiful woman and not someone who had no guarantee of improvement. No man deserved that.

Mariah eventually pushed away from the bed and began folding her clothing. She had to organise her underthings, gowns, dresses, shoes, accessories, and sparse beauty products so unpacking would be easier once she arrived in London. The Baroness had assured her that she would have all the privacy she needed and be well-taken care of by her family. Mariah had never heard of these people before and was somewhat apprehensive about meeting them.

"Will they like me?" she wondered aloud. "Are they like the Baroness and Louisa? I wish I knew more."

Mariah knew the Baroness' cousin had two daughters around Mariah's age and a slightly older son. The woman had hinted at possibly finding a love interest in the young man, but Mariah doubted she could ever fall for anyone ever again. One broken heart was more than enough.

Kneeling, Mariah carefully put away her mother's scarf and jewellery, making sure they were hidden beneath her gowns. Would the Baroness' family steal them? Lady Tottenham and Louisa had taken most of Mariah's mother's belongings despite Mariah's protests. It had been a painful and bleak day in her life and had come as a shock because her father had only been buried a week.

"I've allowed so many things to simply pass, never arguing too much because I didn't want to upset anyone," Mariah said bitterly. "Now it all lies heavily on my mind as though this is the end. The end of what? I do not know."

Mariah felt that she was on the precipice of a new life, and she only had to take one step forward to fall. The only problem was she did not know if she would fall only to fly or fall to her death.

An hour later, Mariah stood to her feet, stretching her back. She was finally done packing and all in good time. Her room looked so bare *sans* all her belongings. Well, this hadn't been Mariah's room at first, but she had been moved here soon after she grew ill, and Louisa took over her room.

The Baroness' had explained that it was to protect them from her

sickness, and Mariah had understood, but it had hurt all the same. On the upside, she was closer to the servant's quarters, so she wasn't completely alone in the house's east wing.

Mariah pushed what she could towards the door, but the heavier trunks would have to be lifted by the male servants. Perhaps she should call one of them to take her luggage down. It would certainly make it easier when Mariah's moment of departure arrived.

She would be travelling alone in a stagecoach, a first for Mariah, and she felt concerned about the trip. What if something should happen? Who would help her? Mariah knew about bandits attacking carriages and stealing the travellers' belongings, or worse, killing them.

"Oh, I'm frightening myself for no good reason," she scolded herself. "Nothing will happen to me."

Still, Mariah couldn't deny the knot of fear in the pit of her belly. To keep her mind occupied, she took out a book she would read during the journey, a story about adventure and fantasy. Mariah was just about started to read it when Tessa entered the room with a tray of tea. She groaned, putting her book aside.

"Do not tell me it's that horrid tea."

"I'm afraid so, Miss. My lady told me to insist that you drink it that it may fortify you during your long trip."

"Oh, very well," said Mariah, sighing. "Bring it here, please."

Once Mariah had taken a sip, Tessa smiled and left the room. Mariah waited several seconds before emptying the tea into the chamber pot. She was far too busy wallowing in a mire of self-pity to work on her health these days. The most amusing part of it all was that she felt better now than she had felt in some time.

“I might as well return the cup,” she decided aloud.

However, when Mariah opened her door, she paused, her hands clutching the doorknob until her knuckles turned white.

“No,” she cried softly.

Mariah could clearly hear John speaking to Tessa downstairs. What was he doing here? Shutting the door, Mariah locked it and slid down until she felt the floor. She was not leaving her room until John left. The Baroness wouldn’t make her, either.

“He must be here to see Louisa,” she said to herself. “I’ll just wait here until he leaves. I doubt he’ll think twice about me once he sees Louisa.”

Louisa was his new love, after all. Mariah wished she could say that she wished them well, but she didn’t. Not yet. Drawing her knees to her chest, Mariah rested her head on them and waited.

A knock at her door startled her, making her yell out in surprise. “What is it?” she said a little more rudely than she had expected.

“Miss, the Earl is here to see you,” said Tessa. “He insists that you come down and join them.”

Mariah snorted. Join them? Was John out of his mind? There was certainly no way Mariah was going down there to witness the man she loved make moon eyes with Louisa.

“Please tell the Earl that I cannot see him at the moment.”

“What reason will I give him, Miss?”

“Anything you like, Tessa,”

“Oh, Miss,” Tessa cried. “I’m not good with reasons. Please come down. The Earl seems desperate to see you.”

That caught Mariah’s attention. “Isn’t he with Louisa?”

“Both the Baroness and Louisa are with him, but he’s not paying them any mind. He wants to see you.”

Mariah was curious enough to push her heartbreak aside and stand up, opening the door.

“Very well, I’ll see him. Do I look presentable?”

Tessa grinned. “You always look beautiful to me, Miss. Shall I announce you?”

“There’s no need. We can go down together.”

Mariah took her time, already regretting her decision. Why must her curiosity always get the better of her?

Upon entering the room after a deep breath, Mariah’s eyes first found John’s form, feeling pain at the sight of him. She quickly looked away, digging her nails into her palms.

Calm down, Mariah. You must act naturally. Do not let him see how you are suffering.

Mariah noticed a small man sitting beside John, his bag clutched to his chest as though it was his very life. Who was he, and what was he doing with John?

“Come away from the door, Mariah,” the Baroness demanded. “Take a seat.”

The woman seemed tense but was fighting to keep her composure. *What on earth was going on here?* Louisa just seemed bewildered as she stared between her mother and love interest. Mariah chose the closest

seat to the door, observing everyone with interest.

I seem to have walked into a mystery.

John stood up, his face beaming as he greeted her. “How are you, Mariah?”

Why was he so happy while everyone else looked worried? Mariah reminded herself that anything to do with John was not her concern.

“I am well, my lord. Thank you for asking. May I ask why I have been summoned? I’m afraid I do not have much time to spare as I am preparing to leave for London soon.”

John’s face fell, his eyes filled with confusion. “Why? No, never mind that. I suggest you put your plans on hold until you hear what I have to say.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Please, just give me a moment,” he begged and turned to the Baroness and Louisa. “Tell me, did you plan to continue poisoning Mariah in London?”

Mariah’s eyes bulged at the same time Louisa whimpered, and the Baroness spluttered. The only ones composed were John and his companion. Lady Tottenham finally stood up to her full height and, pointing at the door, ordered John to leave. That just about floored

Mariah. What on earth was going on here? What was this about poison, and what did it have to do with her? Mariah thought to ask, but John spoke first.

“Mr Jones, would you mind giving me a moment to speak with these women? You may begin your search.”

“Search what?” the Baroness demanded.

“Certainly,” the small man replied, ignoring her. “Please excuse me.”

Mariah watched the man hurry outside, turning back to John when she heard him stand up and start to pace the floor.

“What do you mean by all this, Lord Winchester?” the Baroness demanded.

Mariah heard the anger in the woman’s voice, but also...fear? What did she have to be frightened about?

“Give me time to explain it all, Lady Tottenham. You know, it took a long time to figure out what you and your treacherous daughter had done. You certainly were clever in how you executed your plan.”

“I’m sure I do not know what you are on about,” the Baroness said haughtily. “I think I told you to get out of my house.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot do that. You see, I have come to save Mariah from your evil schemes.”

“Save me?” Mariah repeated.

“Yes,” John affirmed. “Save you. You see, your stepmother and stepsister have been poisoning you for so long that it actually makes me sick and disgusted to think about it. Haven’t you ever noticed how you only grow weak after drinking that foul tea?”

Mariah shrugged. “I suppose so, but there is a reason for that. My bouts of illness do not follow a pattern, so I drink the tea to keep the illness from taking over my body.”

Mariah frowned as she realised that what she said didn’t make any sense whatsoever. She drank the tea for her health, but she still grew weak. That was likely because the tea was too weak to combat the effects of her sickness. Pleased with the explanation, she waited to hear what else John would say. Why was he accusing the Baroness and Louisa of poisoning her? They would never do that.

“The tea is making you sick, Mariah,” said John. “There is nothing wrong with you. Your stepmother and her daughter have been giving you high doses of valerian and coupling it with wine. Haven’t you ever wondered why she gives you so much wine to drink at balls and dinner parties? She was ensuring you wouldn’t be a nuisance to her and Louisa. You see, they’re jealous of you and need you out of the way to attain the status they so desperately want.”

Mariah grew so still that she stopped breathing. She remembered she needed air and sucked in a gulp, her eyes still on John. He appeared

sincere, but surely, he was wrong.

“Why are you accusing my family?” she finally asked.

“‘Tis no accusation but the truth,” John said firmly. “And here is the truth.”

He gestured at Mr Jones entering the room, his bag in one hand and a large vial in another. The man handed the vial to John, whispering something in his ear. John nodded, and Mr Jones returned to his seat.

“Allow me to properly introduce Mr Jones. He is the apothecary I called to discuss Mariah’s condition. He explained something very interesting to me. Valerian is harmless in small doses, but high doses would render you weak, and if you add alcohol to that…let’s just say the result is not something I wish to see again. Well, Lady Tottenham, what do you have to say to that? Would you like to tell Mariah what this substance is that you’ve been making her drink?”

The Baroness said nothing, but the horror on her face was answer enough. Pinpricks of alarm travelled down Mariah’s spine, making her tremble.

“You’ve been poisoning me?” Mariah asked, her voice surprisingly even. She stood up, coming to stand before the Baroness. “Answer me!” she screamed.

The older woman flinched. “I can explain.”

Mariah shook her head, backing away. How? How could they have done this to her?

Chapter 19

Mariah held the sides of her head. She felt like she was going mad! Someone kept saying no over and over again, but no one else in the room was talking. They were all staring at her with varying degrees of fear and hate. Was she the one shouting the words? Mariah couldn't tell because she wasn't able to think over the screaming in her head. Someone touched her arm, but she jerked away from them.

"Do not touch me!" she screamed. "All of you, just leave me alone."

"Mariah, let me help you, please," John begged.

She stared at him. He had come to tell her this bad news. As far as Mariah was concerned, he was as much to blame as the others at that moment.

"I don't want your help," she yelled. "I don't want anyone's help."

John's eyes showed his hurt, but at least he took no further step toward her. This wasn't happening; it simply wasn't happening. Mariah tried to make sense of what she had learned, but her mind was still spinning with the knowledge.

For months and months, she had believed she was to blame for her illness, only to find that the people who were meant to care for her were the very same people poisoning her. Why? They had already taken much from Mariah. Why take her health as well?

Mariah no longer felt safe in the room. She spun away, but the movement was too quick for her. Light-headedness assaulted her mind, causing the room to spin, although she herself was no longer moving. Mariah felt herself sway before her legs gave way, but her body never touched the floor. A strong pair of arms caught her, sweeping Mariah off her feet and laying her on the chaise longue.

Mariah kept her eyes closed, squeezing them tightly shut against the world that lay around her. It was a childish notion, but she wanted to believe that all the bad would disappear if she kept her eyes closed, and life would eventually go back to normal. Mariah would see her mother walking into the parlour with her embroidery in hand, and Papa would be by the fireplace smoking his afternoon pipe.

She would be curled up with a book, a throw tucked around her legs to keep her snug and warm, and a cup of steaming hot chocolate beside her. Mariah tried to hold onto that image with all her might, but someone kept calling her. Why couldn't they leave her alone?

"Mariah, please open your eyes," said John. "I'm right here. I'll never let anyone harm you again."

John sounded so sincere, but could she trust him? He had broken her heart, but could she blame him for that?

No, I cannot. None of this is his fault. He came here to help me, and all I've done is be rude to him.

Mariah knew it was time to open her eyes and face reality, but oh how she wished it was all dream. The first face she saw was John's

frightened one. “I am fine, my lord.”

“Thank heavens,” he breathed. “I was so afraid…But you are well.”

Mariah nodded, moving into a sitting position. John tried to help her, but she stopped him.

“I’m fine, my lord.”

“Yes, you said that. I only wish to help. This is a challenging time for you, and I do not wish anything to happen to you.”

Why was John behaving so sweetly towards her? Didn’t he know that it was inappropriate considering his attachment to Louisa? Mariah understood that Louisa had done wrong, but that was no reason for John to change his mind about her. That would make him rather fickle, wouldn’t it?

Mariah looked at the woman who had caused all this drama. The Baroness sat motionless in her seat, looking at no one.

Proud until the very end. One would think she would know when she was defeated.

“Do you mind if I speak to the Baroness alone?”

Mariah didn't want an unnecessary audience listening to her conversation with the woman. Oddly, Mariah felt no fear at the thought of being alone with the Baroness.

"Yes, I mind very much," John protested. "She's a dangerous woman, Mariah. I do not trust her around you."

What John said made sense. The Baroness had been slowly poisoning her, after all. Who knew what might have happened if Mariah had gone to London? Despite all she knew, Mariah still felt unnaturally calm.

"I suppose you can all stay since you know everything," she decided with a sigh. "This is an awkward situation, isn't it?"

No one answered her. They were going to sit here the whole day if Mariah didn't get to the point. She looked straight at the Baroness, who still appeared fixated on the wall opposite her.

"Lady Tottenham," Mariah addressed her. "Although I do not think you deserve that title."

The woman turned to her sharply. "How dare you!"

"No, how dare you," Mariah countered. "I think you may have forgotten that you poisoned me, not the other way around. The question is, why?"

Mariah was amazed by her own composure. She lifted her hand, holding it steady. Not a tremble in sight. She had been a raving banshee a moment ago, but Mariah was all calmness and serenity now. Focusing her attention on her stepmother, Mariah waited for her response, but the woman said nothing.

“Perhaps you did not understand the question, Mrs Cull,”

The woman’s eyes flashed. “I will always be Lady Tottenham, and you will address me as such.”

“That’s true. You will remain Lady Tottenham until your death, but you’ll never be the true one. My mother alone was deserving of that title. You have disgraced it with your evil ways.”

“Watch your tongue, Mariah. I am still your stepmother.”

“You were never a mother to me!” Mariah yelled, her composure slipping. “You never wasted an opportunity to express how I was a burden to you. I did everything to please you, but it seems it wasn’t enough for you. You wanted my very life! Why did you do it? And you will answer me or so help me...”

Something in Mariah’s voice must have finally gotten through to the Baroness because she began to explain her actions in great detail.

“I do not regret anything I have done, not after what your father did,” the Baroness declared. “Do you know that he left everything to you? The money, this estate, all the properties–everything! Your father left nothing for Louisa and me. We were going to be at your mercy for our

every need, and I wasn't going to allow that to happen."

Stunned, Mariah could find nothing to say. All this time, she had believed that her father had left her nothing, but that was far from the truth!

"I married your father to become something in this world," the Baroness continued. "I wanted a better life for my daughter and myself. My first husband wasn't a good man. He gambled all the time and kept mistresses throughout our marriage. He loved to take his anger out on me, so much so that I thought I would never walk again, but I got back on my feet for my daughter's sake. I decided that enough was enough, and I put an end to his behaviour."

Mariah's jaw dropped. Had the woman just confessed to killing her husband? Another thought more horrible brought Mariah's hands to her mouth. Had the Baroness killed her father? Mariah's father's death had been sudden, shocking everyone. He had been sick for some time, but the Baron had been recovering when he took a turn for the worse. Never did she think the Baroness could have had a hand in it.

No, no. Do not get ahead of yourself, Mariah. Do not jump to conclusions.

"Get to the point, Lady Tottenham," said John coldly.

Mariah shot him a frown. He wasn't the victim here. She was. "I'll handle this, my lord."

"I just don't want you to be manipulated by her," John protested. "I agree that her life has been horrendous, but that doesn't justify what

she has done to you. If anything, it should have given her the compassion to treat you well."

"I am most certainly justified!" the Baroness snapped. "I deserved a better life; my daughter deserved a better life. I did what I had to."

"And what exactly did you do?" Mariah pressed.

"I paid the executor of the will to lie to you and claim that your father left everything to me. It was rather easy, you see. Women have significantly fewer rights than a man, and I used that to my advantage. Since your estate is managed by the executor, I could keep you from knowing about your inheritance. However, there lay one obstacle before me."

"What was that?" Mariah asked, more interested than she should be.

This was just like a mystery novel, and she was the victim, or rather, the heroine of the story.

"If you married, your property would legally pass to your husband," the Baroness explained. "Men being men, your husband would have looked into the matter and discovered your inheritance. I couldn't allow that to happen, so I came up with the plan to administer valerian to you, rendering you unable to perform the simplest of social interaction and thereby keeping you from possible suitors."

John began laughing, drawing everyone's gaze. What had gotten into him? Nothing about the situation was amusing. Compelling but not amusing.

“My apologies,” he said, still chuckling. “I found your statement rather funny, Lady Tottenham. Your actions had the reverse effect. Everything you did only drew me closer to Mariah. I suppose you won’t be happy when I do this.” John proceeded to get onto one knee before Mariah, looking at her earnestly. “Will you marry me, Mariah?”

Mariah scrunched up her face, shaking her head. “Have you lost your senses? You wanted to marry Louisa.”

John barked out laughter, shocking her. “Lucy told me you would say this. She mentioned the letters, but I can assure you that those letters did not come from me. Do you believe me?”

“I…I don’t understand,” Mariah stuttered. “Then who wrote them?”

“Either the Baroness or Louisa, but my money is on Louisa.”

Mariah looked at the young woman then, noticing the guilty expression on her face. “Louisa?”

The young woman looked away, effectively admitting her guilt. That meant...Mariah searched John’s eyes, wondering if he truly meant to marry her.

“I love you, Mariah,” he confessed. “I’ve loved you for some time which would explain my urgency to help you rid yourself of this sickness. I never knew that my determination would unearth a dark

pit of lies that go further than we probably know. However, none of that matters anymore. I wish to know how you feel about me. Do you think you could love me? I have enough love for us both, but I hope in time your affection for me will grow."

Mariah bit her bottom lip, blinking away the tears that threatened to fall. John loved her! This was far more than she had ever expected, and yet it was all she had hoped for.

"You don't have to worry about having enough love for us both because I have my own love for you," she admitted. "I love you and cannot think of anything better than becoming your wife."

John stared at her tenderly, kissing her hands. "You've made me the happiest man alive."

"I'll never allow your marriage!" the Baroness hissed. "Never, you hear me? I will not support this union."

Mariah had actually forgotten about the woman amid her happiness. Narrowing her eyes, Mariah fixed her with a hard stare.

"I do not need your support," Mariah told her. "I do not need anything from you because I have all I need, despite you trying to keep me from it. If you think to oppose my marriage, I will expose every disgusting thing you have done to me for all to hear."

The Baroness paled. "You wouldn't dare."

“Oh, I most certainly would,” Mariah promised. “Hold your devious tongue, and I’ll keep this evil a secret. The only thing you will have to deal with is being homeless, but I’m confident your family in London will take you in. You did say that they were wonderful people. Why don’t you and Louisa take my place instead?”

“Mama!” Louisa wailed. “Do something!”

“Keep quiet!” the Baroness snapped. “You are not helping.”

“But Mariah wants to evict us from our home,” the woman cried. “Where will we go?”

“You should have thought about that before you did what you did,” said John. “The truth always comes out.”

“This is your fault!” Louisa accused him.

Mariah was tired of hearing the woman blame everyone else for her misfortune. Louisa had made Mariah feel guilty for things she had never done, and now it was time for the spoilt woman to accept the consequences of her own actions.

“No, Louisa. You can’t do that anymore. I won’t let you blame others,” Mariah stated. Enough was enough.

Chapter 20

John was so proud of Mariah. She was finally standing up for herself. For too long, he had witnessed her life be dictated by what the Baroness and Louisa wanted, never protesting even when it didn't benefit her. Mariah was coming into her own, and John would ensure she continued to grow without the hindrances of the two evil women. Could he call them women? John didn't think they were deserving of the name.

"I can do whatever I want!" he heard Louisa protest. "Who are you to tell me anything?"

John's jaw tightened. The young woman just didn't understand, did she? They had lost, and Mariah had won. John wanted to put Louisa in her place, but he knew Mariah needed to do it for her own peace of mind.

"I am the person who holds your future in my hands, Louisa," Mariah replied patiently. "I can destroy your reputation and make you homeless all in one day."

"I always knew you thought you were better than my mother and me!" the foolish woman threw back at Mariah. "You have acted so self-righteously and pretended to be a lovely person, but you're no better than anyone else."

John believed Mariah was better than the Baroness and her daughter, but not for the reasons Louisa clearly thought. He wondered if the woman had some sort of mental deficit because nothing she said made any sense. Anyone with eyes could see that Mariah was a kind person

who never put on airs.

“Was I better than you when I let you kick me out of my own room without question?” Mariah asked quietly. “Was I better than you when I watched you purchase dress after dress, accessory after accessory, and whatever your heart desired while I had to be content with the little you and your mother allowed me to have? Was I better than you when I continued to treat you like a sister and give you the benefit of the doubt although you insulted me at every turn?”

“When your father was alive–” Louisa started.

“Do not drag my father into this!” Mariah snapped. “He treated you like a daughter and gave you everything you ever asked for. You wanted for nothing! My father showered you with love and affection, giving you all the attention you demanded. I was always content to merely be in my father’s presence, but you always just wanted. Did he ever deny you anything? Did he?”

Louisa lowered her head, saying nothing. John had to smile. Perhaps the woman was finally coming to her senses.

“No, he never denied you anything,” Mariah answered for her. “He treated us equally, and I was happy because I believed I finally had a sister. I even shared my things with you because that’s what sisters do. I could never understand why you hated being around me. I did everything I could possibly do to forge a relationship between us, but you rejected me at every turn. When Papa died, I thought you would finally show me some compassion…” Mariah paused, her voice breaking.

John took her hand, squeezing it gently. “I’m right here,” he

whispered. “Finish what you started. You need to do this.”

Mariah nodded, squaring her shoulders. “I thought the loss of a dearly loved father would bring us together, but you chose to isolate me even further. You took every opportunity to mock me while you and your mother slowly poisoned me. You were not content with taking my possessions; you wanted to take my life. I can only imagine how deep your hatred for me is, but I can honestly say that I will never hate you that much. Life is too short to harbour such poisonous feelings, and I do not wish to become like you or your mother. I suggest you stay out of my way until I can stand to look at you both.”

John wanted to clap his hands and call for an encore, but that probably wouldn’t be appropriate. Mariah turned to him. “Why don’t we go to the garden? I do not wish to gaze upon the faces of people who hated me so much that they tried to do away with my life. Mr Jones may follow us.”

John nodded, allowing Mariah to pull him into the garden, the apothecary close at their heels. Mariah suddenly released his hand, and she ran off, bending over a small shrub as she emptied her belly.

“Mariah!” he cried.

“Just a moment, please,” she begged. “Stay there.”

“But–”

“Please, John. I’m fine.”

John wished to take Mariah in his arms, but he had to respect her wishes. Helplessly, he stood by, watching Mariah's body shake with the force of her retching.

"Is this normal?" he asked the apothecary.

"It could be the valerian, but I think it is the fierceness of her emotions, my lord," the man replied. "She has just gone through a moment that most people will never experience. That would make any person sick to their stomachs. I, for one, am disgusted with the behaviour of those two women. They are a disgrace to their kind."

Mariah had stopped retching, but she didn't turn back to him. John looked on with concern, wishing Mariah would allow him to support her.

"I would have them kicked out of the house today," said John. "But I doubt Mariah would consent to that. Her heart is too kind."

"That is a wonderful woman you have chosen, my lord. Never let her go."

"Yes, she certainly is wonderful, and I never intend to let her out of my sight. Mariah is stuck with me whether she likes it or not. Fortunately, she has agreed to marry me."

"My congratulations to you, my lord. May you always be happy and have a quiver full of young ones."

John believed he would be happy as long as Mariah remained by his side. “Thank you. Would you mind finding a servant to bring Mariah a glass of water?”

“Of course, my lord.”

The apothecary bowed slightly and hurried through the door they had exited. No longer able to idly stand by, John approached Mariah.

“Let me help you,” he insisted.

“I don’t want you to see me like this,” Mariah protested, waving him back.

“You don’t pick and choose which parts of a person to love, Mariah. Sick or healthy, I want to be by your side. You need to understand this.”

Mariah turned to him, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “I’m not quite used to all of this yet.”

Did she mean their betrothal or what had transpired in the parlour? “At least believe that I want to help you. Not because I feel sorry for you, but because I love you.”

Mariah smiled. “I love hearing you say that. It makes me feel warm inside.” Her expression clouded over. “I don’t know if I’ll ever come to terms with what they’ve done. What scares me is the thought that the Baroness may have had a hand in my father’s death. I’ll never be able to prove it, and she’ll never admit it.”

“That is true, but evil will always lose in the end, Mariah,” John assured her. “The truth has a way of revealing itself.”

“I hope so. Where is Mr Jones? I hoped to speak to him.”

John didn’t have to reply because the man appeared with Tessa by his side. The woman carried a tray of refreshments, her eyes immediately falling on her young mistress. John watched Tessa put the tray down quickly, taking a cup to Mariah.

“Oh, Miss!” Tessa cried. “I heard it all—wicked, wicked people. I knew there was something not right about them. Now, you drink this up, and you’ll feel much better.”

Mariah thanked her, taking the water from the maid. She turned away as she delicately swished it in her mouth, walking away to spit it out. John heard Mariah call Tessa to her, whispering something in her ear. The maid nodded, soon disappearing into the house. Mariah came back to him, smiling apologetically.

“Would you excuse me for a moment, gentlemen?”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to freshen up. I won’t be long.”

John couldn’t see anything wrong with her appearance. “Why?”

“A man does not ask a lady these questions, John,” Mariah smiled. “I’ll be but a moment.”

A man appeared some moments later, going to the spot where Mariah had emptied the contents of her stomach. He poured a white powder over it, which John supposed was to neutralise it before cleaning it up.

John fell into conversation with Mr Jones to pass the time, but only half his mind was present. The other part was with Mariah. He didn’t like her being in the house with the Baroness and Louisa, and Mariah certainly couldn’t stay to sleep here. John knew Mariah wouldn’t kick the women out yet, so other accommodations needed to be found. He would have to discuss it with her because John certainly wasn’t leaving her behind.

Mariah returned, looking refreshed and wearing another dress. Her hair looked like it had been brushed because it gleamed in the sun, emphasising her lovely grey eyes.

“I wasn’t too long, was I?” she asked.

“Any time spent apart is too long,” he said truthfully. “Did you run into any trouble in the house?”

“I didn’t see the Baroness or Louisa if that’s what you meant.”

“Good. I hope they stay away from you.”

“I’m sure they will. Now, Mr Jones,” said Mariah, addressing the apothecary. “Do you think I have a chance of recovering fully? I feel well today, but I do not know what the lasting effects of the valerian are.”

“Would you allow me to briefly inspect you, Miss Nightingale?” the small man asked.

Mariah nodded, sitting down to give the man better access. It only took a minute or two before the man stepped back.

“I believe time will eventually cleanse you of all the valerian’s effects, Miss Nightingale,” the man told her. “I believe you’ll recover well.”

“That’s wonderful news, Mr Jones,” said John, relieved. John withdrew a bag of money, handing it to the man. “For all your trouble.”

The apothecary didn’t even look at the bag as he took it. “My thanks, my lord. I must take my leave of you, but I wish you both the best for your future.”

Mariah stood up, standing by John. “Thank you, Mr Jones. You have been instrumental in helping me, and I’ll forever be thankful.”

Tessa appeared as though she knew she was needed and led the man away. Once alone, John took both Mariah’s hands, kissing her palms.

“I never thought we would ever get to this point,” he said.

“I never believed this was possible!” Mariah said with a laugh. “I was so certain that you loved Louisa.”

“Never! You were the one who caught my attention from the very first moment.”

“At the Hatcher’s ball?” Mariah asked.

“No, it was earlier that day. You had just arrived at Martin’s house with Lucy. I only saw your eyes, but they intrigued me so much that I asked about you. When I knew you might be at the ball, I searched for you.”

“Indeed?”

John nodded. “You caught me before you even knew it, and I’m glad you did. I love you, Mariah Nightingale, and I know that I always will. I love you fervently, hopelessly, and religiously. There will never be a place that you can go where you’ll not feel my love.”

Mariah's eyes misted. "You say such pretty words, my lord. A woman could swoon and be quite overcome with such a confession. I think your hands are the only things keeping me anchored."

John also felt that he could gladly float upwards because he felt so light, but John was also full of joy that he could burst.

"It's your turn to confess your love," he said. "This conversation is rather one-sided."

Mariah chuckled, throwing her head back. "I thought you said you had enough love for both of us?"

"I do, make no mistake about that, but now that I know that you love me, I wish to hear it."

"I suppose I should make my fiancé happy," she agreed, her eyes sparkling. "I do not know if I will outdo you, but I certainly love you. The evening I spent by your side at the Hatcher's ball filled me with the hope of the future, and I believe I began to fall in love with you there. You are the only one I saw and wanted to be with. It may have been only one night, but I believe my heart decided it was enough to love you. And now here we are, together at last."

John was elated to hear that Mariah had begun to love him so early. If only he had known about it then.

“Usually, this is the part where couples kiss.”

Mariah’s eyes widened. “Now?” she asked, looking around.

“There is no better time. No one is about, not that it would matter to me. You are as good as my wife.”

Mariah blushed. “I suppose a little kiss is acceptable.”

John did not have a ‘little’ kiss in mind, but he felt it better to show Mariah what he meant rather than tell her. He drew her in his arms, laying a tender kiss on her lips that went straight to his head. They eventually pulled apart, both of them shaking.

“Well,” said Mariah breathlessly. “I do not think that was a little kiss, but I am not complaining.”

John laughed. “I’m glad I pleased you, my lady. The only thing I would change is this scene. Remind me to have my gardener create a better garden for all our romantic moments.”

“Just as long as we don’t grow any valerian,” Mariah insisted.

That went without saying.

Epilogue

Mariah couldn't decide how to arrange John's love letters. There were so many of them that she couldn't fit them in the little box where she had kept the first three she had believed were from him. Of course, Mariah now knew Louisa had written them out of spite, and thus Mariah had promptly disposed of them. Never again did she wish to see the wretched papers!

Lucy entered the room, grinning when she saw what Mariah was busy with. "Do not tell me he has sent another one?"

"Very well, I will not tell you," said Mariah, tongue-in-cheek.

"John has sent you one every day since you were engaged. Sometimes two a day! I've never seen a man more in love than him."

"You have your own admirer," Mariah reminded her. "Hugh has been to the house every day."

Lucy coloured. "He comes to see Martin."

"But he always looks for you."

"Oh, hush," Lucy scolded. "There will be no talk about Mr Hugh Hatchers. That man is merely a womaniser. He probably fancies himself a Casanova."

Mariah could tell Lucy liked Hugh, but she was guarding her heart. Lucy was not one for soft feelings and words of endearment, but Mariah had a feeling Hugh might change all that.

"John tells me that Hugh is no longer the same man. He has changed, and for the better. I believe he has changed because of you. Now, I know you might not accept that," Mariah said quickly when Lucy tried to argue. "But I have also seen a change in him. Perhaps you need to look closely and see what we see."

"Oh, pish, posh," said Lucy, waving her hand. "I came here to speak about your upcoming wedding. I'm truly so happy for you, but I must admit I am not looking forward to seeing you leave this house. It has been great fun to have my best friend under my roof."

John had insisted that Mariah couldn't stay in her home with the Baroness and Louisa. He suggested she live with Lucy until the wedding, which Mariah had only been too happy to do. It had been years since she and Lucy had spent the night together, let alone several. The Baroness had forbidden Mariah to sleep anywhere but her own room, barring her from spending the night at Lucy's house.

"I've enjoyed being with you again," said Mariah. "Do you recall how we would also spend the weekends with each other? Sometimes, you would come to my house, and other times I stayed with you."

"We got into the most trouble then," Lucy remarked, chuckling. "Speaking of houses, I cannot believe the changes your home has gone through. I'm rather jealous."

John had ordered all the furniture, wallpaper, and décor to be replaced after the Baroness and Louisa ruined everything in a jealous rage. Mariah had been appalled when Tessa had informed her of the two women's doings and wanted to confront them only to find out that the women had fled.

John had taken it upon himself to replace everything–an extravagant wedding present for her. It wasn't the only thing he had gifted her, but it was certainly the most meaningful.

"John is generous to a fault. I can hardly keep up with the gifts he sends each week. I'll have to tell him to stop."

"Why?" Lucy cried. "The man obviously loves you and wishes to shower you with gifts. Do not disappoint him by refusing them."

"But he has already done so much for me, Lucy. Saving me from the Baroness and Louisa was enough to put me in his debt forever."

"I doubt he will ever stop, so get used to it," Lucy advised. "That man is pure gold. Had I been in his place, I would have exposed the wicked witch and her daughter the second I found out what they had done to you. He only allowed them to stay at the house because you pitied them."

Mariah had thought the Baroness and Louisa would have some gratitude for her allowing them to stay in the house, but the women were bitter until the very end. Perhaps they might have remained in the house had the entire situation not been revealed.

John had kept his word to Mariah and said nothing to anyone outside of their circle, but Hugh and Martin had not promised her. The men took matters into their own hands and spread rumours that the town's local apothecary did not know how to properly administer doses to his clients.

The man didn't take the rumour lying down and told everyone who would listen that the Baroness and Louisa had forced his hand. Once the townspeople got a hold of the information, they gathered together to confront the two women. The Baroness and Louisa fled following the town's outrage and had never been seen or heard from again.

"Now, I will never have to deal with them again," said Mariah. "I do feel somewhat sorry for them and wonder where they are."

"Do not let John hear you say that," Lucy warned.

"I know. He never wants to hear either of their names again. I did tell him that hating them would do him no good, but John is a rather stubborn man. Almost as stubborn as you are."

Lucy arched an eyebrow. "No one will take that title away from me. I earned it. So, when do we begin the wedding preparations? Mama is keen to go shopping and help you plan everything."

Mrs Dunn had stepped in and promised to help Mariah as her mother would have. Mariah was grateful because she had no family left and would have been lost.

“Perhaps tomorrow. John has sent word to a French seamstress about making my wedding gown as well as other dresses I’ll need as the Countess of Winchester. I’ll have many duties in my new role, but I’m not too nervous about that. I’m more so worried about meeting his family. They have never seen me, and yet I’ll be marrying their only son. What must they think of me?”

“That their son loves you and wishes to spend his life with you,” Lucy said firmly. “They will love you as much as we do, Mariah. Never fear.”

For all Lucy’s words of encouragement, Mariah was still apprehensive about meeting the Blackmores. Mariah hoped they would not object to the marriage and welcome her into their family, but only time would tell.

Several weeks later, Mr Dunn walked Mariah down the aisle and toward the love of her life. John looked handsome in his attire, and from the way he stared at her, Mariah knew she looked beautiful. Her dress was a simple one, but it looked like something stitched by angels. The silk whispered softly against her skin with each step, working with the pearls around her neck to create a gentle melody that only she could hear.

Finally, Mariah was handed to John, who appeared ready to cry. She had been weeping since she left the room, but now all Mariah could do was smile. Her day had finally arrived, and she couldn’t be happier.

She glanced briefly at the guests, recognising their lovely faces. Each person present was someone who loved and cared for her. Even John’s family had accepted her as their own.

Mariah thought back on the days when she believed no good would ever come of her life, and yet here she was getting married to a man who loved her with every breath he had. She only wished her parents were here to witness this special day, but Mariah knew they were watching from wherever they were.

Vows were spoken, and rings were exchanged. Before she knew it, Mariah had become John's wife and the new Lady Winchester. The ceremony had been beautiful, better than Mariah could have dreamed, and there probably wasn't a dry eye in sight.

John kissed her hand and led her down the aisle, bending his head towards her.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"More than I can say," she gushed. "I don't know if I'll be able to sleep tonight. I'm far too excited."

"Good, because I do not intend to sleep, either."

John sent her a meaningful look, making her blush furiously. Today was undoubtedly the start of a happy future together. Mariah couldn't wait.

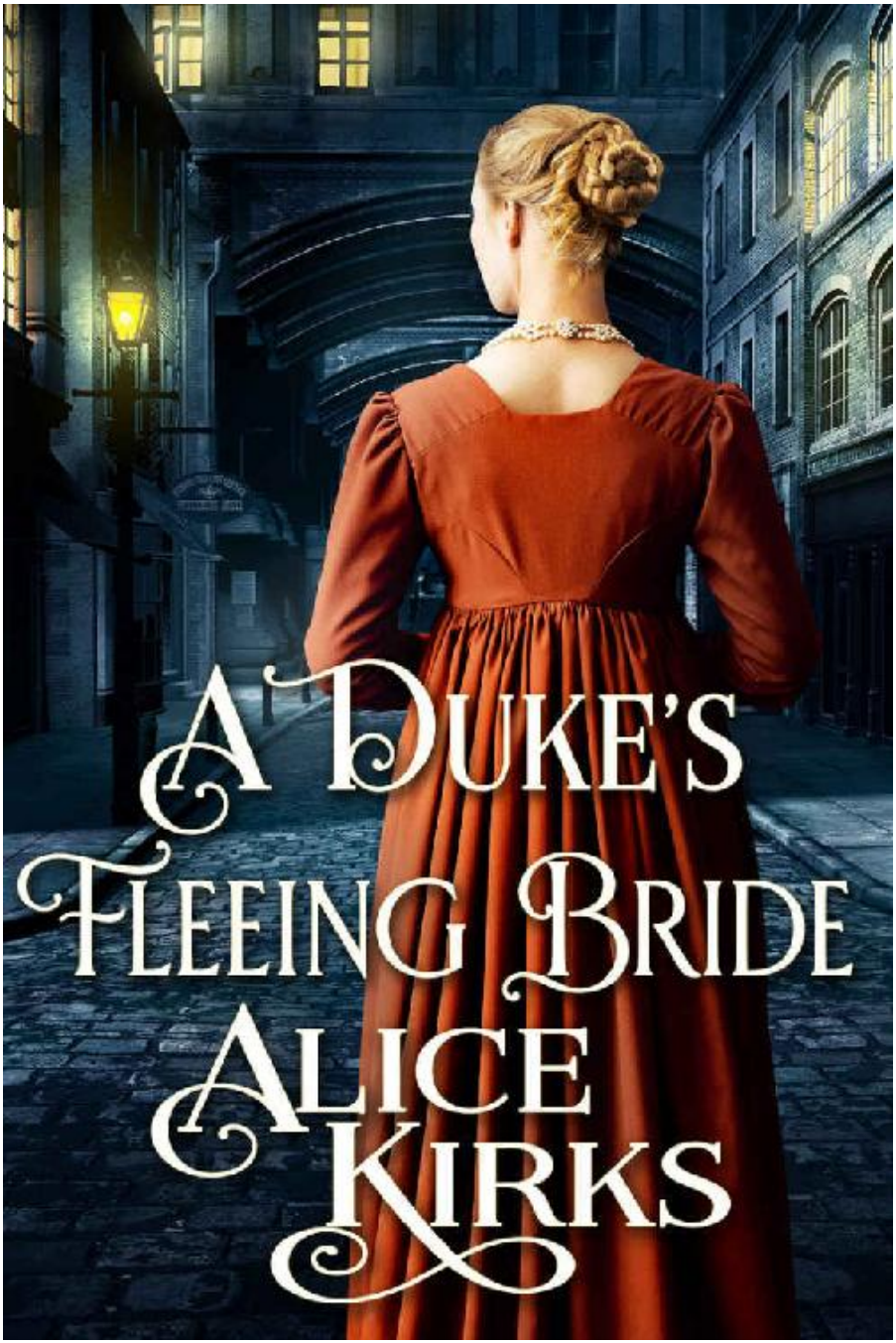
THE END

Can't get enough of Mariah and John? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

In what way will Mariah and John's life evolve over time? Will they manage to keep the spark alive?
How will Mariah feel upon finding out that the evil Baroness and Louisa are in London?
Will Mariah ever manage to feel sympathy about one of the women who nearly destroyed her life?
How will Dianna and Jonas handle the fact their daughter is planning to marry someone who lacks nobility?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://alicekirks.com/mariah

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"A A Duke's Fleeing Bride"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


A Duke's
Fleeing Bride
Alice
Kirks

A Duke's Fleeing Bride

Introduction

Lady Dianna Blackstone has no desire for marriage, and as an untamed spirit, she has always craved for more freedom. When her parents announce that she is soon to begin an official courtship with the arrogant Duke of Wharton, Dianna is left with no choice but to run away from her worst nightmare. After disguising her identity, she finds a position as a maid in a nearby village, but unfortunately, her employer turns out to be painfully unpleasant. In an unexpected twist of fate, her detestable intended will track her down, making Dianna's heart skip a beat as he meets another side of him. Will Lady Dianna manage to escape this living hell and give love a chance? Will she realise that the Duke might be more than what he seems and the one who will bring light to her life?

Lord Jonas Haddon, Duke of Wharton, comes across as very arrogant, but deep inside, he is a caring man who hopes to marry out of love and lead an ordinary life. Intrigued by the boldness and independence of Lady Blackstone, he is determined to find her after hearing she ran away. When he finally discovers she is hiding out as a maid, he does everything in his power to prove that he is not the prideful man she thinks him to be. It won't be long until he realises that he can't think of a future without her, seeking to court her even in her position as a maid. Will the charming Duke convince Dianna of his genuine feelings and good intentions? Will he manage to claim the heart of the only

woman who has invaded his dreams and occupied his every thought?

While feelings of affection start to blossom between Dianna and Jonas, Dianna's tyrannical employer makes her life miserable even to the point of her own devastation. On top of this, no matter how hard Jonas tries to persuade Diana to return to her old life with him on her side, her pride does not allow her to give up so early. Will Dianna find her desired escape and could Jonas be the true salvation she has been looking for? Could their everlasting happiness have been right in front of them this whole time or will poor decisions trap them into an unbearable life?

Chapter 1

“Dianna? Come, come. There he is,” Lady Cobston said, rather eagerly as she always did.

Lady Dianna Blackstone drew nearer to her mother. A moment ago, she had been happily enjoying her time walking around Hyde Park with her mother, greeting friends, and seeing acquaintances. Now, however, she could see the object of her mother’s attention, and Dianna immediately shrank back with disdain, wishing that she could be anywhere else.

“Oh, dear, I wish you had worn the burgundy. It goes so much better with your complexion than this,” her mother said, looking at Dianna’s pale blue dress. She thought it was a perfectly fine complement to her brown eyes and light, straw-coloured hair.

“Mother, I am hardly bothered. You know I have no interest at all in Lord Wharton,” Dianna said.

“Oh, but look at him! He would be such a tremendous match for you,” her mother insisted.

Dianna did as instructed, taking in the sight of Lord Jonas Haddon, the Duke of Wharton. His blond hair was cut short, and his strikingly blue eyes seemed to be drinking in the attention he was given. He had always been a man capable of drawing the attention of others, but Dianna wished that he would simply be gone from her life altogether.

“He is no match for me. I do not like the man, and you know that,” Dianna said, hoping that her mother would be understanding.

“He is so handsome. Do you not want a husband who is devastatingly handsome?” her mother asked.

“I care nothing for his looks if he is not a good man. Lord Wharton is arrogant and a fool. He knows that he is attractive and believes he may have whatever he wishes because of it,” she said.

Dianna glanced in his direction again. He stood there, tall and proud, his head held high. He was dressed in finery to the extent that she pictured him more as a pampered peacock than a reasonable man. There was nothing about him that she might find endearing. He was absolutely the last man in the world with whom she desired to become close.

“Clearly, you are the only one who is unimpressed by him. You know, I do believe that he could have his pick of any woman he desired. It truly is a shame that you will not allow him to show such an affection for you,” her mother said.

“If he wishes to have any other woman, he may have her. I will not be shamed for the fact that I care nothing for him. Besides, I have seen how he treats women, and that is nothing of what I would like from a husband,” Dianna expressed.

“You have not seen anything of how he treats women. I cannot comprehend what you are speaking of. It makes no sense, my dear,” her mother disputed.

“Have you not seen him? I have heard stories in which he allows young women to be interested in him, allows them to believe that he will make a proposal, and then he simply vanishes without an explanation. He cares nothing for the heart and feelings of others,” Dianna insisted.

“Perhaps he courted those young women only to find them wanting. Did you not consider that he might have liked them from the beginning and then learned they were not at all the sort of women he would like to marry? It is possible that he changed his mind,” her mother reasoned.

Dianna sighed, shaking her head. She’d heard more than enough to know that it was not just a woman or two who had come to disappoint him. He had disparaged several decent ladies. It was only a matter of pride and his own hopes of being desired and pursued. Dianna found it to be utterly distasteful, and she could hardly believe there were so many who had faith in him.

The way he strutted around, he may as well have thought himself to be royalty. It was utterly unattractive, and it brought to mind the exact opposite of anything she would have wanted in a husband. Whatever it was that led her mother to encourage this, it was certainly not anything by which Dianna would be swayed.

When it came to men and the idea of being with a gentleman, Dianna had no desire to marry at all. She could not understand why she would give herself over to a life in which she was simply the whim of a gentleman who might wish to parade her around, showing her off as though she was something to prove his own worth. What was the point in that life?

Dianna would not allow herself to become anyone’s prize. She knew

she was worth far more than that, and it was a travesty to be seen as so much less. Although her life had been marked by the fact that she was the daughter of an earl and, therefore, nobility, she could not imagine what it would be like to give herself over to the life her mother had.

To be constantly searching and craving a world in which she had a higher status was simply an unbearable thought. There had to be more than this. There had to be meaning. There had to be a life in which she could think and decide for herself, regardless of the expectations surrounding her.

“Come, dear. You must give me an ear. This is a very fine gentleman, and I know that he would be happy to be your husband. Why should he not? It is perfectly reasonable to expect that he might even wish to marry you at once, very quickly and with great eagerness,” her mother said, eyes bright as though it would make a difference to Dianna whether he liked her.

“This is not about my fears that he will not like me, Mother. I am telling you that I would never consent to marry a man like him. He may be a duke, but that is not enough to impress me. I truly would rather not marry at all. It does not matter if he is a man or a peacock; I have no desire to be sold off to whoever is willing to pay Father a few coins for me,” Dianna insisted, trying to maintain a calm appearance although she knew she was struggling a great deal in doing so.

Her mother’s eyes widened, and she pasted a terse smile on her face.

“Dianna, my dear, we are in public, and we are to act like ladies. Shall we behave thusly or would you rather depart?” her mother asked in a tense voice, clearly panicked by Dianna’s outburst.

No one had noticed, as far as Dianna could tell. Although she was certain that her cheeks were red, she had managed to maintain her composure enough that she didn't think anyone had really seen how furious she was. There was no reason to let them all know that she was upset, but she did need her mother to understand. Without that understanding, she was unsure whether she could escape an arranged marriage against her will.

"Mother, I did not mean to embarrass you. No one has noticed anything I have done. You need not be concerned. I simply wished to express my unhappiness regarding the insistence that I must marry at once or that Lord Wharton is a man worth my devotion," she said.

Dianna's mother sighed, and she knew there was a risk. Dianna feared that her mother might begin to urge her to marry this man she so detested, but there was nothing to be done about it. She only imagined that she would have to argue with her mother for a while before her mother would relent and understand that it was not a good match in the least.

If Dianna was forced to marry someone, she wanted it to at least be for love. Although she would rather avoid the thing altogether, she knew she might not be so fortunate. Her mother and father would not understand. However, Dianna had always been quite stubborn. Perhaps, if she were fortunate enough to be heard, they might allow her a bit of freedom, and she might manage to get her desire.

Although her mother had been quiet for a moment, looking off at Lord Wharton, the breeze in her hair, the sun shining down on them as others passed by, Dianna knew that the matter had not been settled. Any moment now, she would be told what her mother did and did not expect of her.

At last, her mother turned back to her.

“Dianna, I understand that you are a young woman with spirit, and you do not wish to be tamed. However, your father and I have no choice but to urge you otherwise. This is the way of things and the consequence of our position in society. As a young lady of noble birth, you are expected to marry, whether you wish to or not.

“You must listen to this and understand that it is not out of any cruelty or wish to punish you. It is for the sake of your future, as well as the family’s name and reputation. If you would be so inclined as to accept what is best for us all, I am sure that you will be reasonable,” her mother said.

Dianna had no desire to be reasonable, as her mother put it. She had no desire to be used as a pawn in the game of society. She had no desire to allow her mother and father to trade her as though she had no meaning or purpose in her own right.

“Mother, I do not understand why you push this so, but I shall not relent. I *will not* marry someone because you and Father insist upon it. It is only going to be out of my own heart and desire to marry that I will do so,” she insisted, a childish stomp of her foot leading to immediate embarrassment and regret. The tears in her eyes threatened to expose the most vulnerable parts of her. Dianna knew she was making a mistake, but so overwhelmed was she by the circumstance that she did not know how to stop it from happening.

Her mother sucked in another panicked breath before looking around and smiling with those wide, anxious eyes at the passersby who clearly noted Dianna’s improper demeanour.

“Mother, forgive me,” Dianna said at once, dropping her shoulders back and taking on a calm posture to fight against the behaviour she had just displayed. It was not going to win her any battles, nor did it have the appearance of decorum that she otherwise hoped to maintain.

“I believe we must depart at once,” her mother said in that tense voice of hers.

Dianna nodded, and the two calmly, patiently walked from Hyde Park as though nothing of note had just taken place.

The ride home in the coach was utterly silent, and Dianna had no idea what consequences awaited her. She understood there would be some sort of price to pay for how she had acted, what with all of her complaints and furies, but she hoped that it would lead to a calm, peaceful conversation with her mother and father in which she might be allowed to express her hopes and opinions on the matter.

They arrived at the estate, and Dianna turned to her mother to speak, but her mother held up a hand.

“Go to your room. I do not wish to see you for the time being. I would like to forget about this afternoon, but I must take some time to consider the best decision for our family after the display you put on,” her mother said.

Dianna nodded and made her way up the stairs, knowing that none of this was over.

The bell rang for dinner, and Dianna assumed she would be allowed to make her way down to join. As she traipsed down the staircase, the sound of her mother's and father's voices drifted up towards her. She froze and leaned against the wall to listen to her mother and father from within the dining room.

"I simply do not know what to do with that girl anymore," her mother said in exasperation.

"I know, darling. She is a most infernal child, completely full of her own, strong will," her father replied.

"So, what shall we do? I believe the only option is to urge her to marry, but I am certain that she is only going to argue against it," her mother said.

Dianna felt sick with regret, wishing she had not behaved in such a way. She was adamant that she could not possibly marry now—and certainly not that particular man. However, she had behaved abhorrently and knew that there would be consequences. She felt certain she was soon to learn what those consequences might be.

"If Dianna is going to maintain any sort of respectability, there is only one thing for it. We must marry her off at once. There is no room for this insolence. If we find her a husband now, it will save us a bleak future," her father determined.

Dianna saw a maid enter the dining hall from where she stood on the stairs. The maid carried a tray of food as she entered. Nearly instantly, Dianna heard her father's raised voice.

"What are you doing? Did I give you leave to enter here? Can you not hear that we are in discussion? Get out! Get out of here with that pitifully arranged platter and come back when you are told. Foolish maids! Why do we even keep such witless creatures?" he demanded.

The maid rushed from the room, food spilling over the tray and onto the floor. She was clearly upset about such treatment.

Dianna's father was not typically a cruel or rude man, and she felt quite guilty, knowing this behaviour was due to his exasperation with her.

Still, seeing that the girl was visibly shaken, Dianna quietly rushed down the hall after her, determined to make amends. Perhaps it was not too late to show the maid a bit of kindness.

As for her own situation and how her mother and father would respond to it, Dianna was perfectly aware of her own reality.

It was too late.

Chapter 2

“Ah, Jonas, darling,” Lady Wharton greeted, coming to meet her son. He was seated in the study, and she was lavishly covered in gems, ready for the ball that evening. Jonas had decided he would not attend. It was not out of any sort of spite or disdain, but rather that he was tired, and he was not overly fond of the gentleman hosting the ball.

“Mother? Good heavens, you look ravishing. I am certain that you are going to draw the attention of every last eligible bachelor in the room this evening,” he said, complimenting her.

“And I am certain you know it is the farthest thing from what I am hoping to find. There is no gentleman there who will pique my interest, my dear. I have loved, and I have lost, but no one is going to replace what I was so blessed to have. Now, shall we move on to discuss other matters?” she asked.

“What sort of matters, Mother?” Jonas asked.

“I have received the most intriguing letter. It is from Lady Cobston,” she said.

“And what is it about this letter that you find so intriguing?” he asked.

“She mentions that she is hoping to arrange a match for her daughter and that she has set her sights on you for a son-in-law,” Lady Wharton informed him with a playful smile on her lips.

“Is that so? Lady Cobston, I do believe she is the one with the rather beautiful daughter, is she not? Then again, are they not all beautiful?” he asked his mother, teasing her. After all, he was supposed to notice just a few things about the women with whom he was meant to consort. They were all beautiful. They were all wealthy. And they were all daughters of earls and barons who had hopes of rising higher in society—or rather, their families had those hopes.

“You are so cheeky. Of course she is lovely. And you are considered quite a desirable bachelor amongst young women such as Lady Dianna Blackstone. So, my dear, what do you say? Would you agree to meet her?” his mother asked.

Jonas took a deep breath as he considered the request. Just as quickly, he released it. This was an intriguing proposition. He had seen her before, and he really did find her beautiful, although she seemed perfectly aloof whenever a gentleman came around. Something was intriguing about her, something different. She wasn’t the sort of woman to just hand over her attention.

He was so accustomed to young ladies fawning over him that the idea of having to pursue a woman was certainly new to him, and he wondered whether she would respond to him positively, negatively, or even at all. Regardless, Jonas couldn’t help feeling a surge of interest, thinking that this could be the exact sort of woman he had been hoping for.

Although he had never spoken with her directly, Jonas had heard Lady Blackstone’s reputation as being rather witty. That only led him to further wonder about her. At last, he felt ready to respond to his mother, having taken a moment to decide whether he might want to meet her and see if they could possibly have a connection.

“Indeed, Mother. I believe it would be interesting to meet her. I have heard much about her, and I would not mind learning whether she lives up to the hype,” he said.

“I see. So that is how you look at it? You think she is just a young woman for your own entertainment? Very well, I understand. Young men such as yourself are always going on about young ladies who do or do not live up to your expectations, but here you are, clearly intrigued by her. I have little doubt you are just as curious about her as most women are about you,” his mother said, giving a small laugh of her own.

“I should not be opposed to meeting her to determine whether I like her, that is all. Is that not what you hoped I would say? Am I not giving you precisely what you wished for?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. I suppose you are right. Now, I think it would be best if we simply invite Lady Blackstone and her mother around for tea. What do you say?” his mother suggested.

“Very well. It is the best way to make introductions, I suppose, and I have nothing else to do tomorrow. If I have the opportunity to regale a young lady with all my charm, I might as well accept it,” he said.

“Indeed, it is as good an opportunity as any,” his mother said.

Jonas chewed the inside of his cheek, thinking about what might happen when he had the opportunity to meet her individually and whether they would truly get along. He was certainly intrigued by Lady Blackstone. But would she feel the same? Would she be curious

and wish to know more about Jonas? Or would he find that she was every bit as ambivalent about gentlemen as she appeared from a distance?

He could hardly wait to find out, but a small piece of him knew with certainty, this would not be as easy as he might like.

Lady Blackstone barely made eye contact with Jonas across the table. As they sat outside, the little round, tea table shifting beneath them due to one foot of the table being just a fraction too short, she continually glanced off and away at their mothers, who walked diligently nearby, arm in arm, pretending to gaze upon the flowers in the garden.

“Well, it would seem we have a match,” Jonas quipped, hoping that Lady Blackstone might be amused by his humour in reference to their mothers. Instead, she finally looked at him, but it was not with a spark of interest. Her expression was that of boredom and wishing she might be anywhere but there, sitting with Jonas.

“Lady Blackstone, you have a reputation for wit and cleverness. I am curious as to whether I might have the opportunity to see some of that,” he said.

She cocked her head to the side as though examining him. Her eyed narrowed just enough that he could see the challenge behind her expression.

“Is it so rare for a woman to be clever that I am expected to perform at your will?” she asked.

“Wha-no! No, not at all!” he exclaimed, feeling quite the fool as he bumbled his way through to an apology. “That was not my meaning, Lady Blackstone. I was only asking if we might have a conversation. You have a reputation for sparring, and I am quite fond of such conversations. There was no insult meant by my request,” he clarified.

“No, insult, I see. Well, that is a relief. Many young ladies might expect nothing but insult from a gentleman such as yourself. After all, I understand that young ladies are expected to do little more than entertain fine gentlemen, but I am not such a sort of woman, and I fear that I run shy of the patience that might be required for such an exchange,” she said.

For a long moment, Jonas was quiet and somewhat confused. He had expected to meet Lady Blackstone and charm her at once. Instead, she was proving rather volatile. He sensed that she did not wish to be there with him.

Although he had known she was rather cold towards certain gentlemen, he had not expected to be one of them. He had believed that she would prove rather comfortable being herself around him and at least give him a chance. But she appeared far more bent on finding her own independence and not giving him even a moment to express his own personality.

“Well, you certainly do not appear as though you wish to be here,” he observed, deciding to simply address the matter as opposed to pretending that it did not exist. For a moment, she had a flash of intrigue, as though she appreciated his willingness to acknowledge this fact.

“I do not care to be paraded like a peacock, even before those who think themselves to be such magnificent birds,” she said, pointedly.

“And I assume, based on your tone, that this is not the first time in which you have likened me to a peacock,” he said.

“Ah, there you are. So you have a bit of cleverness, after all?” she asked.

“It is a shame that you believed otherwise. As it happens, I may not be as clever as some, but there are many who are far less. And shall I, the peacock, prove myself to you?” he asked.

“Only if you would like,” she replied, allowing him to make up his own mind.

There was a great deal of pressure at that moment, but Jonas realised that he finally had a chance to prove himself and show Lady Blackstone that he really did have good reason for his pride and was not simply some fool trying pointlessly to make himself out to be important.

Jonas was unaccustomed to women who were unimpressed by him, and he found it strangely exhilarating—as well as painfully uncomfortable. He could not quite understand why she wasn’t more intrigued by him or why she behaved as though he was completely uninteresting when most women constantly wanted his attention.

Lady Blackstone surely had a reason for her behaviour, but he could not fathom what it was. All he knew was that she didn't seem to care one whit as to whether he was as impressive as he tried to make himself out to be. He realised at that moment that he would need to try a bit harder.

"Very well. Shall I tell you of my athletic achievements or my business success?" he asked.

"Whatever you wish and whatever you believe I might deem to be more interesting," she said.

Jonas thought for a moment, understanding that she was giving him a challenge, which she did not think he could live up to. It was not as though he wanted to show off, but he was eager to ensure that she recognised his worth; otherwise, she might not be willing to give him even a moment of her attention. He would need to throw all he had in order to make a point.

For a long moment, he wondered whether she would be more interested in sport or industry, but she was completely unreadable. At last, Jonas decided he would simply have to give her one thing at a time and see how she responded before moving on.

"Would you like to hear about the time that I defeated Lord Chadwick —who is rather infamous for his skill—in a boxing match?" he asked.

Lady Blackstone raised an eyebrow and appeared perfectly unimpressed.

“Very well, what about the time I won while fencing with the captain of the guard?” he offered, which was a far more impressive feat.

“Any man might say he has done such a thing,” she replied, looking bored.

“And of the work I have accomplished on behalf of the London economy? Have you a head for business?” he asked.

“I have a head for many things, but young ladies are not allowed to have a head for business and, if we do, we are certainly not allowed to confess it before a gentleman,” she said in answer.

Stuck and unbelievably curious about Lady Blackstone, he paused for a long moment.

This woman was completely unlike any other he had ever met. She was fascinating and bewildering and a perfect chase. She did not bat her lashes and pretend to be a fool for the sake of his pride. She did not agree with everything he said or act as though she might flutter upon a word from his lips.

He could not have been more interested in her, and that thought was a relief. He had always wished to find a woman who might be a real enigma. Here she was before him. There was nothing about Lady Blackstone to bore him.

She was the perfect chase that he had always hoped for. He would have to work hard to impress her, to make her see that he was worthy of her attention. And he would be able to give her all manner of

reason to eventually come around to him, of that he was sure. He would show her the sort of man he was, and soon enough, she would be willing to hear him out. He only needed to find the one thing that might fit into place.

She may not have felt a connection yet, but Jonas did, and that was all he needed. The rest, he believed, would follow.

“Lady Blackstone, you are quite bold. I find that intriguing as most young women, as you have expressed, are not allowed to be so. I cannot help wondering whether you have something, deep down perhaps, that has equipped you to say what is truly on your mind,” he enquired.

“I understand what it is that you would like from me, Lord Wharton,” she replied, straightening her back to get comfortable. “You wish to know if there is a way that you might sway me to swoon as other young women do.”

“I have no desire to make you swoon,” he refuted. “I simply wish for the chance to get to know you better.”

She winced as though she did not even realise she had done so. He could see it in her eyes at that moment. There was nothing he could possibly do to perfectly convince her. But regardless of whether she would be impressed by him at that moment, Jonas was ready to try. He was ready to show her the sort of man he really was.

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